Winter Wonderland

A Pokémon Holiday & Winter Zine

-Vol II-Holiday Food & Treats Edition-

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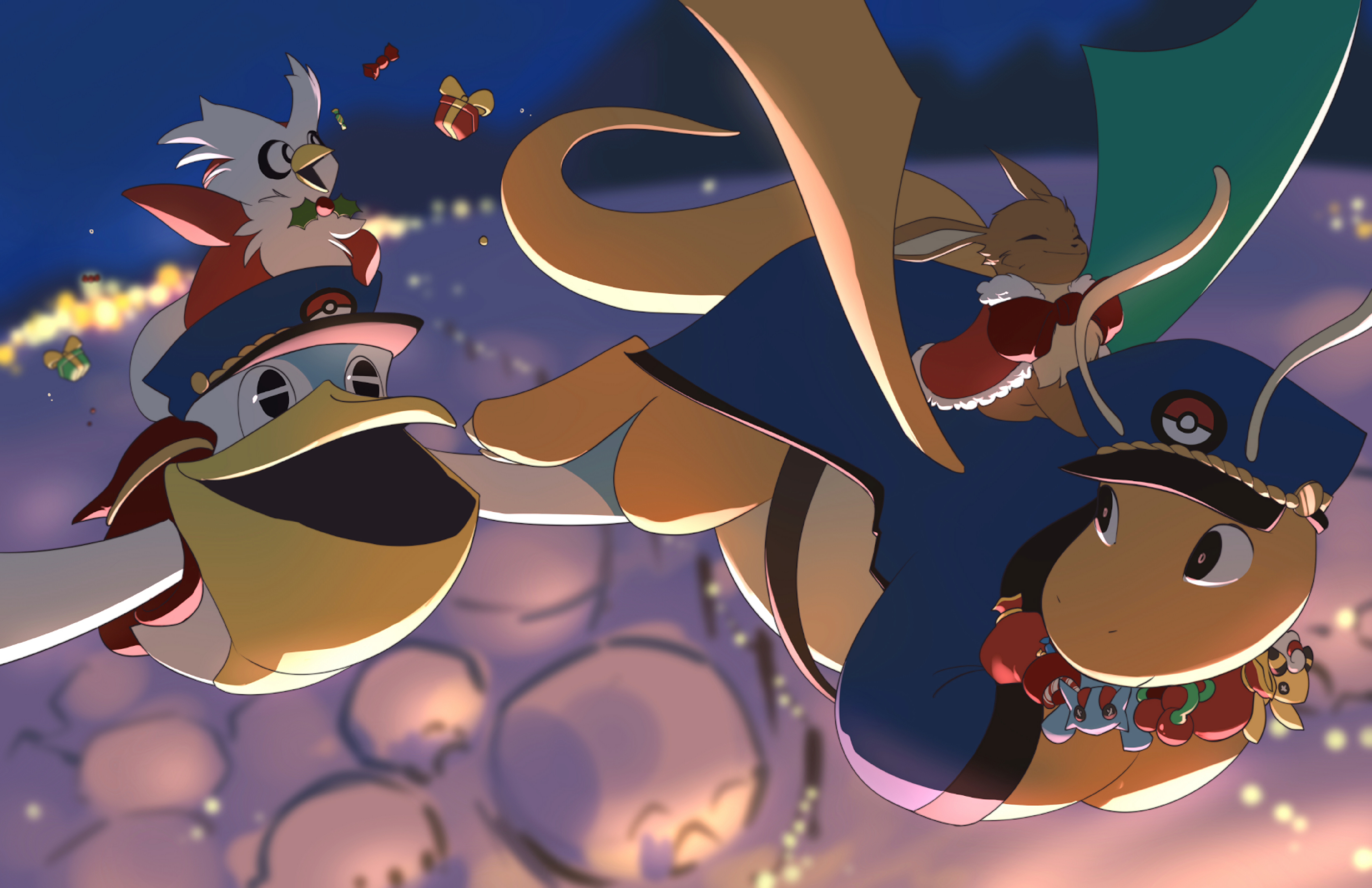


Winter Memories

Winter. A cold time. A fun time. And these days, it was a rough time. The best parts about it were back in the past.

Glaceon stared up at the sky raining down snowflakes, each one getting bigger than the last. It couldn't remember the last time it snowed like this. Maybe back when it was still an Eevee. Back then, things were different. It had fun as an Eevee. Holidays meant something.

Eevee…hey, Eevee…be careful out there! Watch where you're going!

It never failed. Every winter, as an Eevee, Glaceon went out in the snow and always found one soft pile to sink into. Their trainer always warned it not to jump around so much. Don't run in the snow. Watch out for ice. Watch out for soft patches of snow. Those were the moments Glaceon missed as an Eevee. It missed all the warnings from its trainer, a trainer who kept its well being in mind.

Not that it ever stopped. Deep down, Glaceon was still the same Pokémon it always had been. Change or not, it still loved winter time. It loved snow and ice. It loved the warmth of being surrounded by other Pokémon . Those memories flooded again of the nights they spent together. Glaceon loved the outdoors, but being inside was a whole other treat. Friends, light, and above all else, there was always food.

Here you go, Eevee. You get an extra piece tonight.

Oh, those extra pieces of food and cookies. It wasn't smart to feed pokemon too many sweets, but holidays were an exception. Their trainer always made cookies whenever they had time. Chocolate chip, oatmeal, peanut butter, sugar…outside of Pokémon battles, they loved to bake. Of course, they couldn't eat all those goodies by themselves so they fed their Pokémon. Those sweet morsels were a welcome change from the normal Pokémon chow.

Not that Glaceon ever heeded that warning. Yes, their trainer was only thinking of their well-being. They didn't want Glaceon getting ill from eating too many sweets.

Still, every time they got something to chow on, Glaceon devoured it while moaning later in the night. The food was so good and painful at the same time. Meanwhile, the other Pokémon sat around and listened to Glaceon groaning away. That was their cue not to eat any more sweets.

Oh, Eevee! What did I tell you?! You're not supposed to eat too fast or too much! What am I going to do with you?

Then there were the other times when Glaceon tried to make food once with the other Pokémon. It couldn't be too hard. They watched humans cooking many times. They watched them measuring ingredients, roasting things over a fire, and plating them up.

Human food was a little more complex than Pokémon food, but they were all made in the same way. No, it couldn't be that hard to make something simple like meat, vegetables, and sweets. Sometimes, they even had a warm drink, which didn't take long to put together. When Glaceon threw that idea to the other pokemon, they agreed to make a meal their trainer would love.

It can't be hard. They do it all the time. They never make a mess. They make good food. We can do it!

The others agreed in unison. *We can do it! We can do it!*

As it turned out, cooking was much harder than any of them expected. None of them knew how to read a cookbook, let alone measure anything or handle kitchen utensils and appliances. Not even Glaceon, who came up with the idea, could figure out how to make a smooth sauce for their food. Everything they threw in came out lumpy and raw. They spilled flour, sugar, and salt all over the floor. No one knew how to operate a microwave, let alone a regular oven. The food never became food to eat; just a giant mess on the floors and walls.

Glaceon expected its trainer to be upset when entering that kitchen. They tried to make cookies out of cocoa and nuts and sugar. Instead, they caused a fire, an ice storm, and tore up the floor. There were no cookies, no other meals made. Only a disaster. Any trainer would be angry at them. Not theirs. They understood what happened and helped with clean up.

You tried your best. I know you wanted to make me feel better. Just next time, ask for a little help.

Afterwards, their trainer helped them make the cookies they wanted. Measuring everything out right, warming the oven to the right temperature, letting everything rise and take its time. Glaceon took its time to pay attention to every detail. All the Pokémon failed by putting in too much stuff or not putting the right things in. Their cookies were all crumbly or burnt. Their trainer's cookies were moist, big, and sweet. A perfect sweet for both humans and Pokémon. Somehow, they knew what to make so everyone could enjoy it.

See what you can do when you take your time? You have to move slow for these things. Then you can savor each bite.

Savor each bite. Even now, Glaceon could taste every sweet morsel on its tongue. The cookie melted in its mouth. Not the mess that it made with the other Pokémon. From that day forth, Glaceon paid attention to everything their trainer did in the kitchen. It knew the right things needed to make cookies as well as other dishes. It wanted to go back to that moment and fix everything.

Just do your best, but don't be afraid to ask for help.

That made sense for the kitchen. It didn't make sense for their next move. Glaceon and the other Pokémon wanted to sing for their trainer. Put together some Christmas carols. Sing their own language, but the melody would stay the same.

Unfortunately, none of them could sing. Or at the very least, they could not sing together. Between the bad mess in the kitchen and their warbling into the night, their trainer should have gotten mad. At the very least, they should have been annoyed. Anyone else would have been furious.

Oh, you guys! It's okay! It's okay that you don't know the words. This is still a very nice surprise. That's all that matters.

Those days, those moments. Sitting out here in the snow, Glaceon wished to go back to them. It wanted to make a mess in the kitchen. It wanted the songs being sung off key. It wanted the nights where they cuddled together, watched the snow pouring outside, and just being together. Where did that time go? Why couldn't they go back to those winter days? Why couldn't they make food again even if it ended up as a mess? Why couldn't…

All good things come to an end.

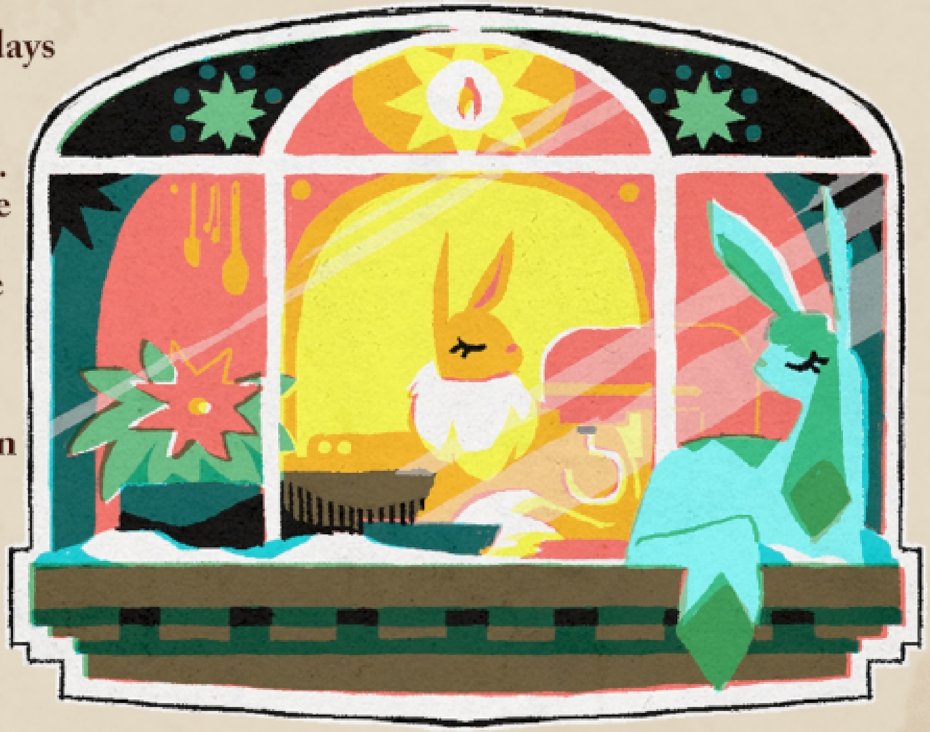
No, that couldn't be it. Winter came to an end eventually. Snow melted, ice became water, all the Christmas cheer faded into a brand new year. They'd have to wait until the end of the new year to celebrate again. If only they could celebrate all year round. If only they could be in this bliss, lost in winter, having a good time forever. The messes, the bad singing, the playing in the snow. They all ended the moment winter faded away.

Eevee…Eevee…Come inside, Eevee! Come out of the cold!

It didn't want to. It wanted to scream and run away and stay out there in that world blanketed in white. Why couldn't it do that? Why couldn't they stay?

"Glaceon! Glaceon, what are you doing out there?!" Glaceon perked up at its trainer's voice. "Come on inside! We're waiting for you!"

Of course. The good days still lasted here . They were in a new place with a brand new year. Glaceon got out of the snow and headed inside where everyone held out cookies. Human cookies. Pokémon cookies. The smell of cinnamon and sugar wafting in the air. The warmth of a fire nearby.



Home.

No matter where they were, they could turn any place into home. It didn't need to go back to being an Eevee for that. It didn't need anything but its friends, trainer, and a place to stay. The past was over with, but new winter memories were waiting to be formed and remembered for later.

"Come on, Glaceon! We had to make everything without you, but it's okay." Their trainer handed them a cookie. "Happy Holidays, Glaceon. I hope you like this."

Glaceon munched on the cookies, wishing their trainer could understand them. It nodded in agreement as everyone else gathered around to eat their sweets. These warm feelings deserved to last all year round. Maybe when it closed its eyes for the night, it would dream about today as well.

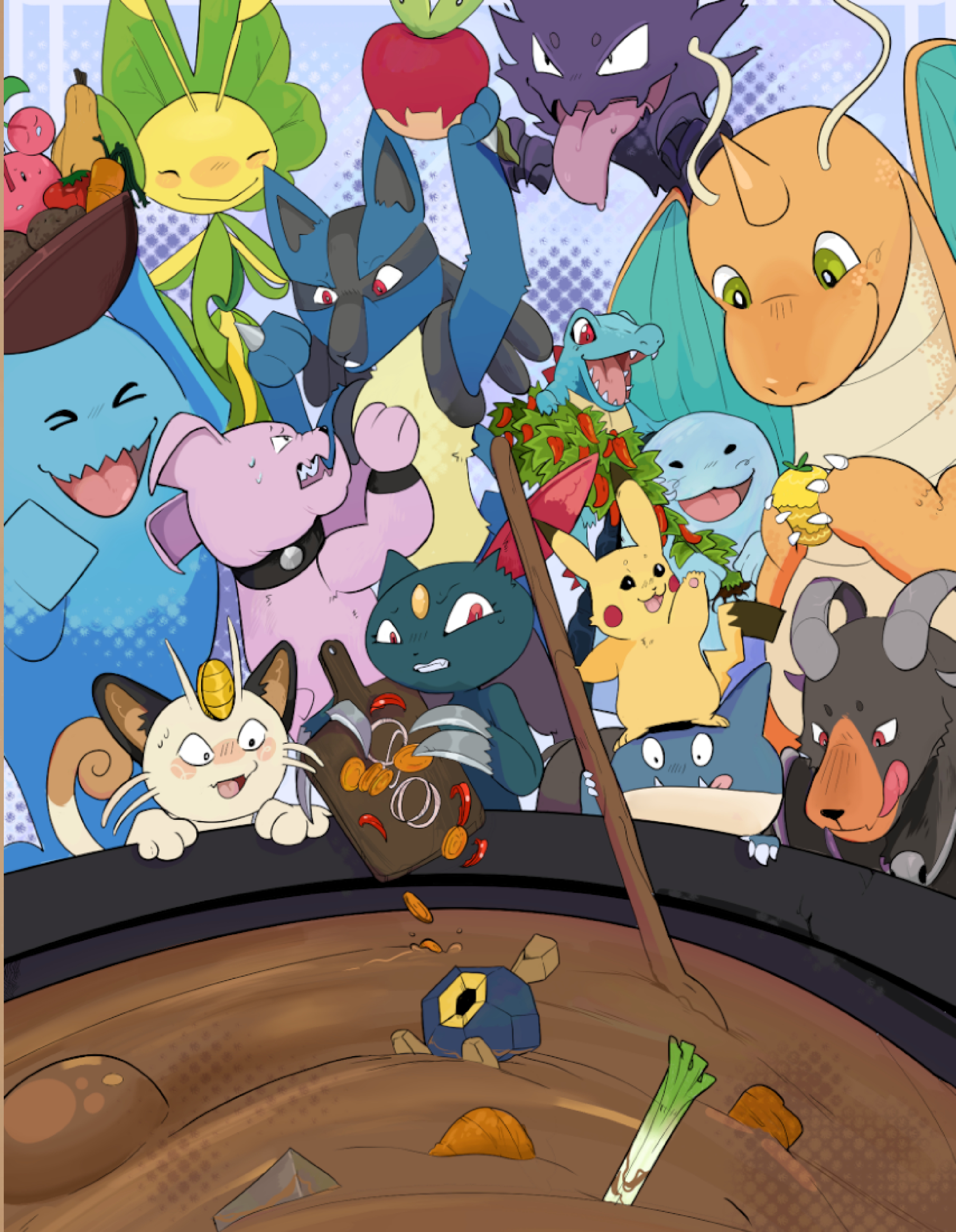
"I hope next year is as good as this one."

Glaceon nuzzled against their trainer, happy to be in their arms again.

That's what I hope for too.

"Winter Memories"

Author: fallsintograce
Spot Art: Crowstrel



Coffee with a Chance of Marshmallows

Temperatures above the Unovan Sea were dropping as winter had once again latched onto the land with a chilly, bone-gnarled finger. The northernmost parts of the region were already experiencing their annual snowfall. The snow-filled gray clouds would soon drift further south until the rest of the region was fully enveloped in the cold, white blanket.

With winter came many traditions and festivities filled with merriment and excitement. As the holiday break approached, Carmine felt a mix of anticipation and nostalgia. It was impossible not to be caught up in the excitement when all her peers were abuzz about the upcoming break from school.

Unovan customs and holidays fascinated her. The celebrations were unlike what she was used to at home. All the foods and beverages were different, too. Unova's cafeteria food, in her opinion, left a lot to be desired. Some of the smaller pop-up carts that were sometimes open around the main campus body to break up the monotony of being under the ocean had better and healthier food options.

"The Liechi Berry Cake Latte is delicious; I'm so glad it's back!" The other student was talking to the employee at the stand near the library just before the elevator to head further down to the floors below.

Carmine recognized the girl from seeing her in the Terarium but did not know her name. Her citrine eyes scanned the menu board, listing the usual drinks to order, while a smaller sign on a table stand detailed the mix of seasonal flavors.

The Unova Region vastly differed from her homeland of Kitakami—the hustle and bustle of crowds traversing the streets. Cold and towering skyscrapers loomed overhead in an oppressive and suffocating way while the lights blotted out the stars in the sky. The city of Castelia never slept, never closed. Twenty-four-hour businesses and cafes were the norm.

It was different from her quiet homeland, where the tallest structure was Oni Mountain.

The wind rustled in the trees, carrying with it the scent of the apple orchards and the muddy water of the rice fields, while the Kricketot and Kricketune sang in the evenings to the setting sun. The soft hooting of the Hoothoot and Noctowls in the trees serenaded her when she slept at night. Sometimes, the Poliwag living in Mossui Town's spillway would bark loudly for rain during the sweltering dry season of the summer. At night, Volbeat and Illimuse illuminated the fields with their dance. The few businesses of her one-horse village closed when the sun went down. Indeed, it was a trial of patience for an impatient person.

While not a patient person by any stretch of the imagination, Carmine preferred to make her teas by her own hand. Mossui Town didn't have a fancy cafe like Unova did on what felt like every corner. She'd long since learned to adapt to her surroundings, even if she loudly complained about it.

She was in her first year at Blueberry Academy when she first heard some upperclassmen talking about the school coffee shop offering seasonal beverages. Carmine seldom liked to spend her BBP on unnecessary things. The earn-to-spending rate was absurd, and trekking around the Terarium on the weekend to earn extra points was not her ideal way to spend a weekend.

Carmine noted the drink's description: *This spicy and sweet drink is made with our signature espresso with milk, our seasonal sugar cookie syrup, and the beloved flavor combination of Leichi Powder. It is topped with toasted marshmallows.*

"I can make that," she thought, her stubborn determination fueling her sentiment. She was not one to back down from a challenge, especially when it came to something she wanted. She didn't have a reputation as a troublesome pest for nothing. Her headstrong ways surely would get her into trouble one day, but that was a problem for future Carmine.

A soft trill near her right shoulder had her glancing at the source. Sinistcha, her plasmoid ghost companion, floated in their tea cup and tilted its tiny head to the side before letting out a chirp, drawing Carmine out of her head. They had been together for as long as she could remember as a constant presence in her life.

Sinistcha's little swirls of eyes narrowed ever so slightly as they trilled again pointedly; one tiny finger-shaped blob tapped the side of the cup impatiently.

“Are you interested in it, too? " She asked her partner as she pulled her phone from her jacket pocket.

Sinistcha nodded in an obvious affirmative. Carmine unlocked her new phone, opened the search engine, and began typing in the name of the drink—several matches with many recipes showed up in the results. While there were several variations of the same recipe, there were enough common ingredients that she was optimistic she could make it.

Musing, she made a mental checklist: Espresso or strong dark roast coffee, Milk of Choice, Honey, Sweet Molasses, Cookie Butter, Liechi Powder, Cardamom Powder, and Nutmeg… brew the coffee, combine the other ingredients in a pan over low heat to make a syrup…, and mix… several of the websites suggested marshmallows, or whip cream and sprinkles as toppers.

The drink was *very* Unovan. So many flavors and spices were added to a basic drink that it sounded like a magic spell from a fantasy series to the point where it was no longer related to the drink that inspired it.

She wasn’t too concerned with toppings. *I can figure that out later.*

She cooked around the house to ease the burden on her grandmother and was adept at cooking. It was one of the only assigned chores she didn’t try to pawn off on Kieran.

The more she looked over the ingredients, the more she felt a pang of homesick loneliness.

Grandpa would love this. She could make it for him when she returned home for the break. It was easy to visualize sitting outside watching the wild Pokémon play near the orchard while sitting next to Grandpa while they enjoyed their coffee.

The thought of her sugar-loving younger brother not-so-stealthily sneaking into the kitchen to steal marshmallows was enough to get her to take a moment to ponder truly. If only because she’d tease him for being a little thief. *She refused to admit that she missed him.*

She’d long since perfected tea making; she could figure out *fancy* coffee.

Sinistcha chirped beside her expectantly. The ghost, every bit as dramatic as their trainer, *always* demanded samples of her cooking. And, for better or worse, they were a brutally honest critic. She felt validated when Sinistcha liked her latest creations.

A trip to the school store and the Baking Club room was in order. *"There goes my BBP,"* she thought sordidly while contemplating whether she *really* wanted to make the drink.

“CHA!” Sinistcha was getting antsy, waiting for her to move. It was laughable. The ghost decided they had the final say.

Carmine didn’t like it when anyone told her what to do, but the teacup of green plasma had been her constant companion for so long that she was willing to make an exception.

“Alright, let’s go then,” she replied as she continued walking to the elevator.

After two short stops for the ingredients she didn’t have on hand later, Carmine returned to her dorm. Thankfully, her stops had been brief. As a bonus, she hadn’t run into anyone feeling particularly chatty, so it had only taken her about forty-five minutes long elevator rides.

Mightyena and Ninetales were curled up together on the floor at the foot of her bed while Leavanny made herself comfortable as she fussed over the tall plant in the doorway. Morpeko had climbed up in bed and napped on her Dudunsparce pillow. All the while, Sinistcha hovered around Carmine expectantly.

“It’s not just gonna appear the longer you stare at me, y’know,” Carmine playfully chided her partner as she set out the ingredients she’d procured.

Her comment did not deter the plasma, who simply chirped impatiently at her in response, moving a tiny hand in a shoo-shoo gesture, clearly meaning for her to get started. She rolled her eyes at the attitude.

They are demanding little thing.

Carmine pulled a small saucepan from the bottom cabinet and didn't bother to stifle her huff of a laugh as Sinistcha floated around her, trilling out a soft song of excitement. "You get so excited when it's sample time, don't you?" She mused aloud.

Sinistcha let out a soft trill of a coo before settling themself on Carmine's head. They'd long mastered positioning themselves so they could easily hold her headband and not slide off her head and down her hair.

Carmine cast one last glance at the ingredients on her countertop and then got to work.

Making coffee wasn't exactly a science, nor was making a simple syrup. Both were time-consuming and required careful monitoring to keep the milk from curdling, but they were doable. She worked methodically, even with the addition of the unnecessary watchful eye Sinistcha kept on her.

Saying anything to the ghost was a waste of her breath. Sinistcha was excited about their taste of the latte.

The rich, smokey aroma of the espresso filled her dorm and felt like a warm hug to her soul in the way that only a cup of coffee could. It made her think of the library - surrounded by books while the aroma of freshly brewed coffee at the stand lingered in the air. Since adjusting to life part-time in Unova, it'd become one of her favorite smells.

The sweet smell of the syrup she'd made was similar to a sugar cookie with the ever so slight hint of the spicy berry. To Carmine, it perfectly captured how she'd describe her understanding of Unovan winter, especially around the holidays.

Warm and cozy, with hints of spice that felt like remnants sitting in front of a fireplace, surrounded by family. The hint of the earthy smell reminded Carmine of the snow that accumulated in the winter under gray skies in which the flurries danced.

Carmine turned the heat off her induction cooker before rummaging through her cabinet for the oversized Mightyena-themed mug Amarys had gotten her months ago for her birthday.

It'd become her go-to cup for warm tea in the evenings when she was done studying and was ready to relax to get ready to do her skincare routine before going to bed.

Once she found her favorite cup, she carefully set it on the counter. Her dear friend - the first real friend she made at school - had given it to her. She'd simply explode with rage if the cup were to break.

She'd just finished pouring the freshly brewed coffee from the pot into her cup when she heard the soft rustling of plastic directly to her right and narrowed her eyes at the sound. She could feel Sinistcha securely resting atop her head, with a firm grip on her headband. Leavanny, Mightyena, and Ninetales didn't mess with things on the counter, leaving only one other culprit.

"Morpeko." Carmine addressed the rodent firmly as she turned to see what sort of mischief the Dark-Electric Type Pokemon was getting herself into. Sinistcha let out a startled chirp from the sudden movement as Carmine let out a sharp yelp. "You can't have that!"

Morpeko, sitting contently on the package of marshmallows she'd chewed a hole into, simply popped another marshmallow in her mouth, completely unbothered by her trainer's concern.

"I don't want your hair in my marshmallows, and I was supposed to give those back to the baking club," Carmine grouched at her Pokemon. "Hand them back."

Her Morpeko, of course, merely responded with an annoyed huff before her yellow fur turned purple as she changed forms. The rodent's glowing red eyes and scowl only further proved her disdain at the thought of being unable to continue eating those delicious, sweet, fluffy treats. (How dare Carmine have the audacity not to let her keep eating until she is full!)

The angry ball of fluff barked in protest at her trainer.

"That sugar ain't healthy for you," Carmine replied firmly, the lax drawl of her accent that she meticulously tried to hide from her peers coming out in her frustration as she reached for the bag. "It's going to make your stomach hurt. And then you'll cry all night, and I won't get any sleep."

Morpeko stomped one tiny paw on the counter and huffed before letting out a high-pitched *bark.*

Carmine's right hand was on the partially chewed bag as Morpeko grabbed the opposing side and barked at the trainer again. *“Don't you dare—”*

But Morpeko *dared,* with her surprisingly firm and impressive grip for her size, and *pulled* at the exact moment Carmine moved to confiscate the marshmallows.

Carmine was met with resistance. *A lot of resistance.*

“Quit bein' a brat about it,” she clipped through gritted teeth, barely feeling Sinistcha shifting their weight and adjusting their grip.

“Ko!”

“You'll be even grouchier when you get sick,” Carmine retorted as she pulled on the plastic.

Mor!” Her Pokémon protested stubbornly. She bared her sharp teeth in disdain. Static crackled through Morepeko's black and purple fur while her glowing red eyes glared at her trainer.

“Morpeko, let go.”

“Peko!”

The thin plastic of the bag stretched from the stress of two opposing forces.

Stretching and growing ever thinner.

And *thinner.*

Until the tiny micro tears in the bag began to *grow* and *expand.*

She remembered *far too late* somewhere in her hindbrain that Morpeko's Pokéball was across the room on her desk in her bag, which didn't help her at the moment.

Sinistcha made a nervous trill once more as their tiny plasmid hands gripped and tugged at Carmine's hair near the roots. It wasn't quite painful, but it was mildly uncomfortable. But *that* didn't matter.

It was already too late.

Thinner.

Thinner.

Thinner.

The bag shredded into two halves, and the remaining marshmallows flew into the air and began raining down on the floor. The soft, squishy treats hit the counter and the floor with a soft *plop, plop, plop.*

“Morpeko!” Carmine shrieked her attempt at a scolding as she took a graceless step backward to balance herself while Sinistcha lost their grip on their trainer and flew sideways off their trainer's head, taking with them her yellow headband.

Morpeko once again changed form back to her cheery yellow-and-black coloration. She scurried around the room to collect as many of her coveted treats as she could to hoard while Carmine rubbed her head—Sinistcha had pulled her hair.

The ghost floated near her and chirped a quiet apology, nuzzling Carmine's cheek with affectionate remorse.

Her gloved right hand moved to allow the haunted teacup to rest in it while Carmine crossed the room with loud, attitude-filled, and angry stomps to pull out her mischievous rodent's Pokéball. *“You don't need'ta make yourself sick, Lil' Spoinklet.”*

“MORPEKO!” The furry glutton protested with defiance, stomping one furry paw to the floor to emphasize her point.

Carmine groaned loudly as she recalled Morpeko and her load of marshmallows dropped to the tile floor. She shook with irritation at the situation while her golden eyes assessed the mess.

Mightyena's long nails *clicked* against the linoleum flooring as she stood and trotted around to investigate the source of the noise that had frustrated her trainer. Ninetales lifted her head with vague interest before laying her head back down with an annoyed flick of her many tails.

"It's not for you either. Go lay back down," Carmine told Mightyena as she put Morpeko's Pokéball back in her bag. The large, oversized canine simply huffed at Carmine before trotting away to lay back down near the foot of her bed.

Not for the first time, she was glad Kieran's bad habit of constantly sneaking table scraps to Mightyena hadn't fully convinced her oversized dog that eating anything on the floor was okay.

Shaking her head, Carmine walked over to her bathroom and pulled her broom and dustpan out of the closet so she could clean up the marshmallow mess. Sinistcha chirped impatiently at her the entire time she was sweeping, floating back and forth between Carmine and the counter where their silly human had simply abandoned their samples!

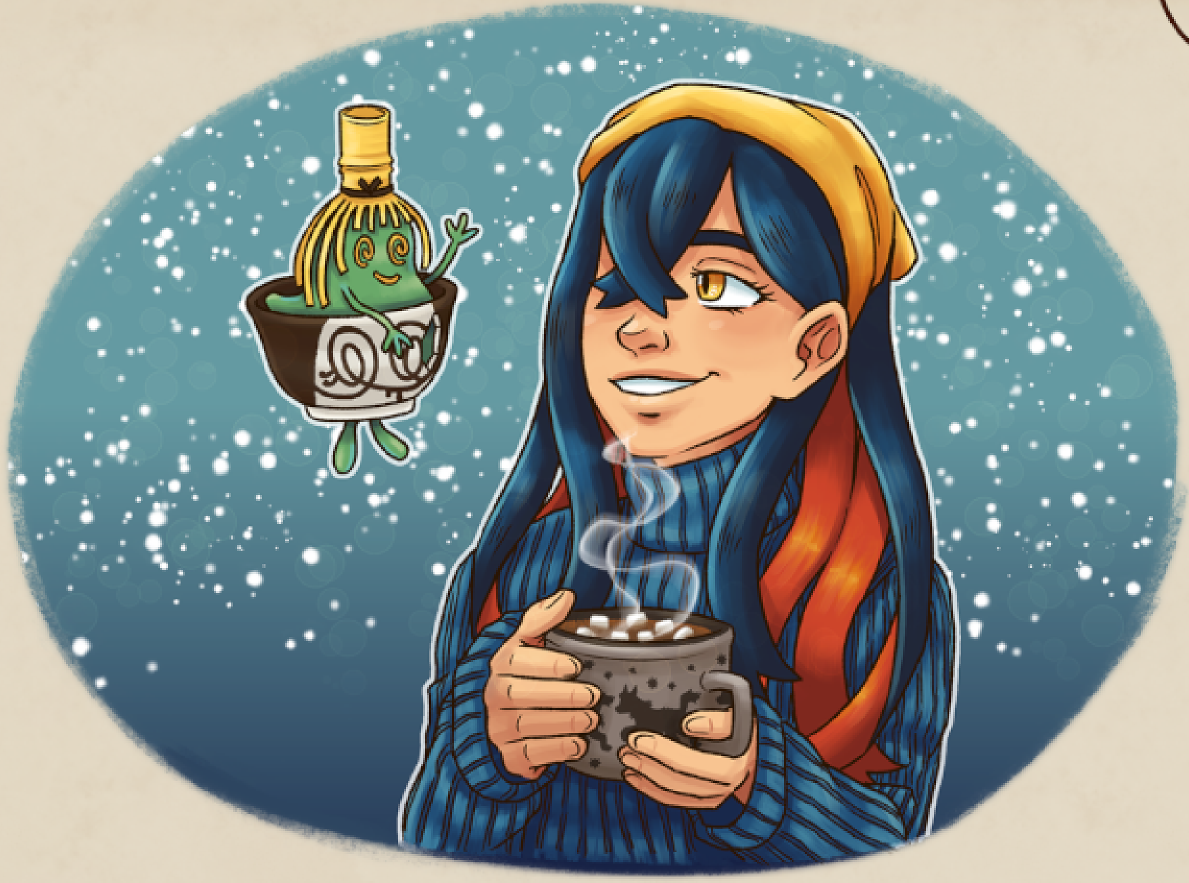
How dare Carmine have the audacity to prioritize cleaning her dorm!

Carmine huffed and shook her head at Sinistcha, then continued sweeping the loose marshmallows into the dustpan before throwing the contents into the trash can.

Finally, Carmine was ready to mix the syrup into the coffee. While clean-up hadn't taken long, Carmine was glad for the minor delay in giving the hot beverage a chance to cool. "Okay, here's your sample, you floaty Grumpig."

Of course, Sinistcha chose that exact moment to act as if they had no idea what she meant. Their plasmid form hummed with delight, continuing to encircle their trainer, humming a sound more akin to a machine releasing steam.

She used a spoon to thoroughly mix the syrup with the coffee before setting the spoon in her sink. She turned to smile fondly at her partner. "First sip to you."



Sinistcha floated over, and their blob of a hand reached in to place a delicate, tiny, matcha-green finger into the drink, audibly making a loud slurp for extra flair. Then, they grew very still and quiet before they erupted into a flurry of theatrics.

Followed by a high-pitched whistling shriek that sounded like the whine of a tea kettle. In a rush to get away from the Mightyena mug as if it offended them, Sinistcha floated away and dropped themself to the middle of the kitchenette's floor and began dramatically rolling their cup around in circles, making noises that sounded like a deflating balloon as tiny green hands slapped at their plasmid face - their swirly eyes squeezed shut in absolute disdain.

Carmine chewed her lower lip; Sinistcha's reaction concerned her. *What if I just wasted all that time and BBP's on supplies?*

She took a small sip. The bitter bite of the espresso coffee was muted by the sweeter ingredients in a way that left Carmine feeling like she had taken a bite of a cake. The hint of spice from the Liechi Berry Powder left a pleasantly delightful tingle on her tongue without being too overpowering.

It wasn't *the* worst drink ever.

Sinistcha just didn't like spicy flavors and was every bit as overly dramatic as their trainer.

Her lips curled into a smile as she took another sip. *Grandpa and Kiki would like this*, she mused as she took a third sip. It just felt like something was missing. Her fourth sip confirmed it—the drink would be better with marshmallows.

If only she hadn't had to throw them away.

"Coffee with a Chance of Marshmallows"

Author: Vivi (Octofae)
Spot Art: Yissil

Homemade Vanilla

Homemade is a little more investment, but it tastes way better, it makes way more, and it makes fora great gift!

RECIPE INFORMATION

Category/Type	Other
Difficulty	1
Prep Time	10 minutes
Rest Time	6 months, but ideally 12 months
Total Time	Only 10-15 of prep and cleaning!
Yield Serves	7

INGREDIENTS & SUPPLIES

1.75 Liter Bottle of Bourbon*
35 Whole Vanilla Beans
7 (8oz) Glass bottles

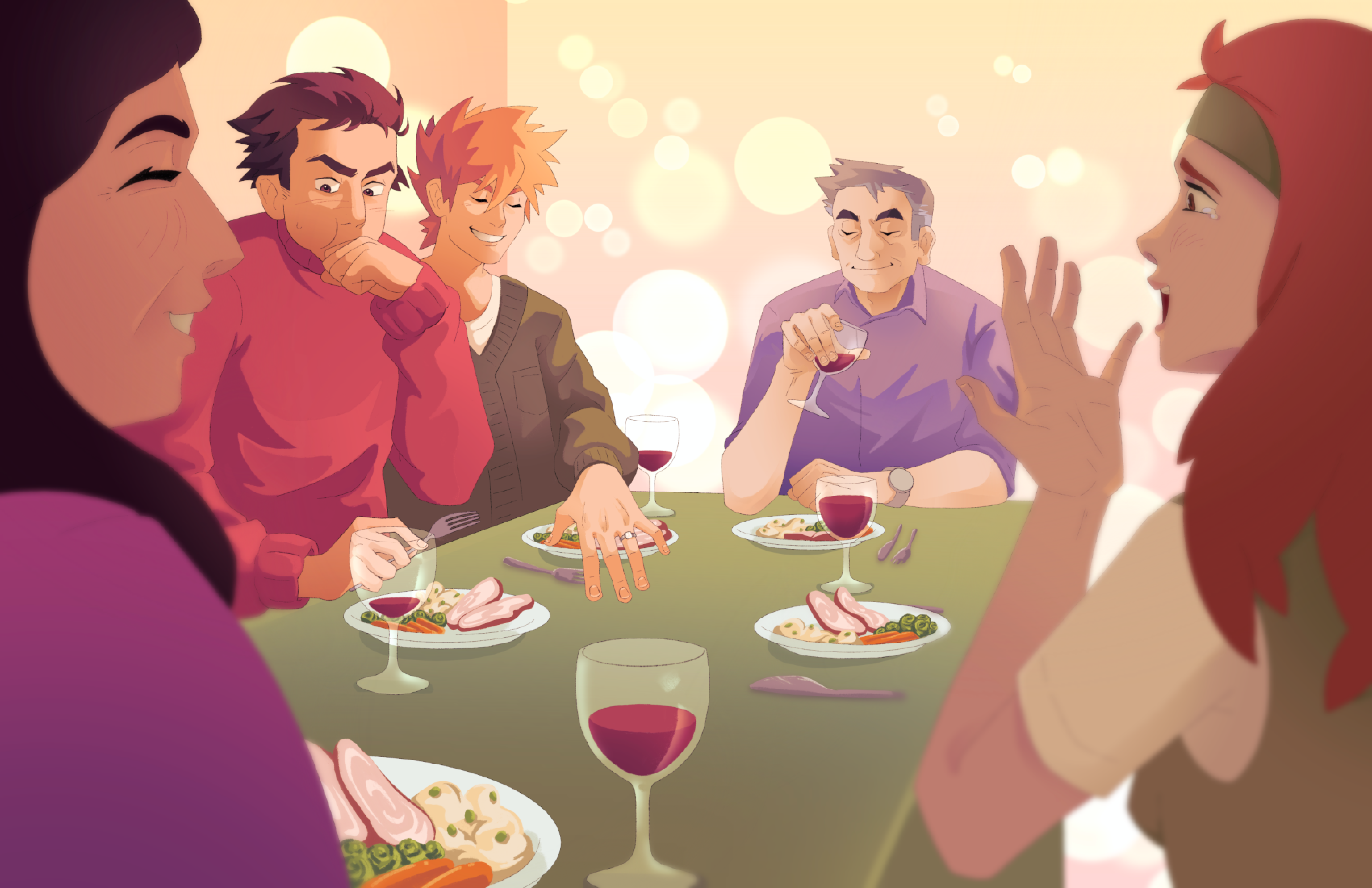
INSTRUCTIONS

1. Split your vanilla beans down the middle, taking care to not smear too many of the little seeds.
2. In groups of 5, place the beans into the glass bottles, and top with 8oz of your Bourbon. Shake for about 30 seconds, and then store in a cool, dark place.
3. Shake once every 1-2 weeks for a minimum of 6 months, but the longer the better!

NOTES/TIPS

You can also use vodka for a more clean vanilla taste, but I think the Bourbon makes for a more complex flavor. You can also experiment with other alcohols, but I find they tend to mask the flavors of the vanilla.

Recipe Author: CoolCoolSkies



Steam Pudding

RECIPE INFORMATION

Category/Type	Dessert
Difficulty	2
Prep Time	10-15 min
Cook Time	5-10 min
Total Time	15-25 min
Yield Serves	4
Suitable Diet(s)	Vegetarian, Pescatarian
Dietary Restrictions	Lactose & Gluten
Dietary Substitutions	Lactaid milk could work as a substitute for any other milk, though I haven't tested it. Margarine should work in place of butter, as would canola oil—any fat will do in a pinch, especially if you include additional mix-ins for flavor.

RECIPE DESCRIPTION

A semi-traditional Galarian (British) cold-weather treat, adapted to be much quicker and easier to make now that microwaves exist.

SPECIAL COOKWARE

-Mixing bowls, skewers, and a microwave.

INGREDIENTS

Steam Pudding
170 g (6 oz) flour, self-raising optional
10 mL (2 tsp) baking powder if flour isn't self-raising
85 g (3 oz) butter
57 g (2 oz) sugar
118 mL (1/4 pint) milk
a pinch of salt
any additional mix-ins you'd like (do note that these amounts are suggestions) such as:
5 mL (1 tsp) cinnamon
5 mL (1 tsp) ginger
142 g (5 oz) raisins

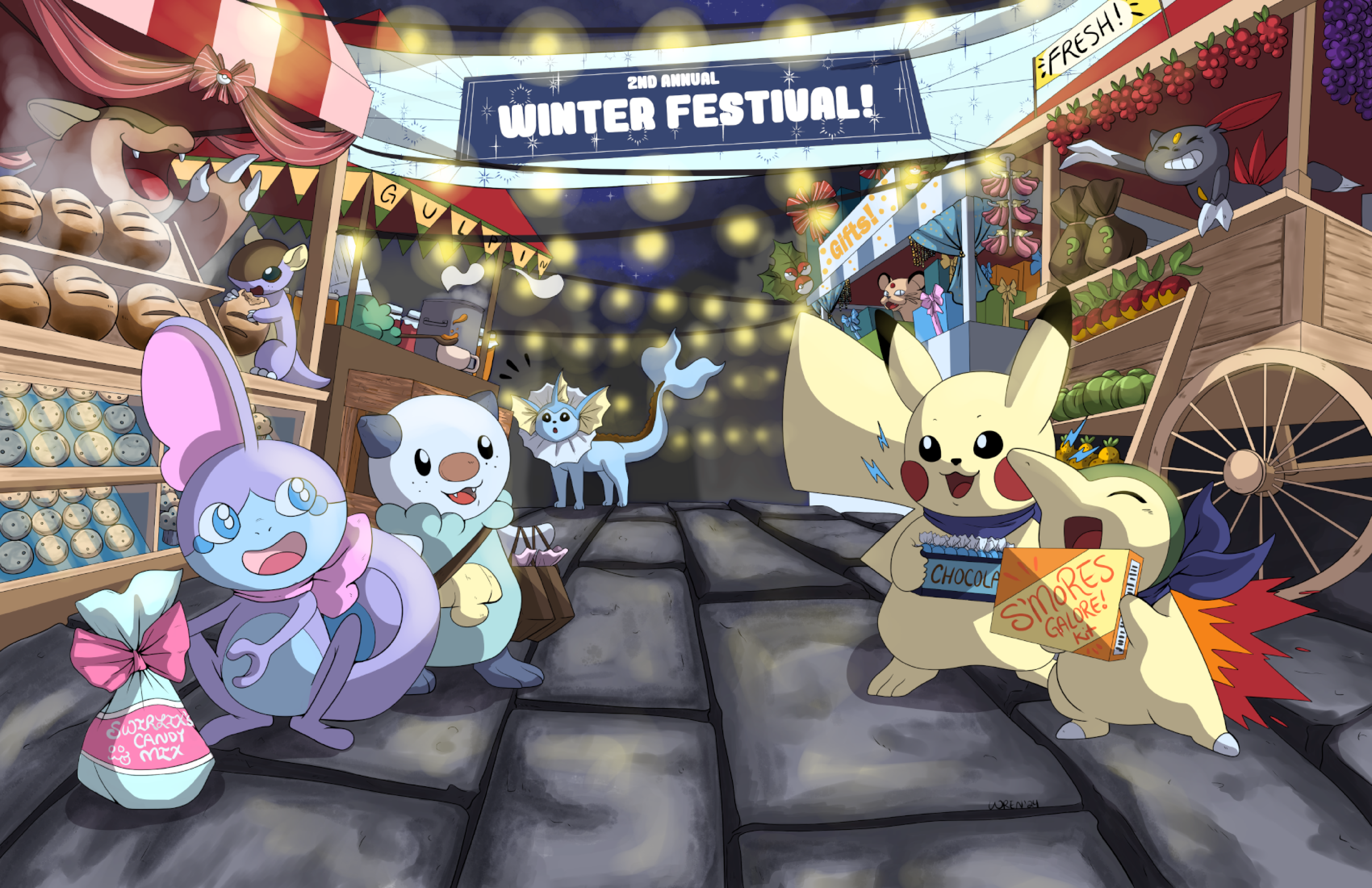
White Sauce:
237 mL (1/2 pint) milk
5 mL (1 tsp) butter
30 mL (2 tbsp) cornstarch
250 mL (1/4 cup) sugar

INSTRUCTIONS

Steam Pudding:
1. Grease a medium-sized microwave-safe bowl with either a loose lid or some other ability to cover it (parchment paper or saran wrap will work).
2. Melt the butter, then mix all ingredients in a larger bowl.
3. Transfer the mixture to the greased bowl. Cover, place it in the microwave, and cook for 5 min.
4. Stick a skewer into the mixture after cooking. If it comes out clean, the pudding is ready. If it doesn't, cook for a little longer.
5. Remove pudding from bowl and enjoy!

White Sauce:
1. Combine milk and melted butter, then stir.
2. Add 2 tbsp cornflour and sugar to taste. Continue to stir and heat until sauce thickens (heat in 30 sec. intervals, then stir, will most likely take ~2 min.)
3. Have fun.

Recipe Author: HopeStoryteller


2ND ANNUAL
WINTER FESTIVAL!
FRESH!
GULPIN
Gifts!
CHOCOLA
S'MORES GALORE! Kit
SWIRLIX'S CANDY MIX
WREN'24

Triple Axel

There's little that Arven likes as much as cooking for his friends. It's not sandwiches tonight, but Myrtle's Koraidon might make an appearance for theft anyway, so he counts it among the number of plates he dishes up.

(He thinks his mom might have made this, once or twice, before she left and never came back. Better not to think about her.)

"This is great, Arven!" Nemona cheers around a mouthful of fried rice. "¡Muchas gracias!"

"Yeah, it *really* is," Myrtle agrees, admittedly a little more focused on eating than chatting.

"We probably don't thank you enough for keeping us from living off ramen and soda," Penny says quietly. "So, um. Thank you!"

Arven laughs awkwardly—this isn't his best work, but it's tasty enough and the others like it, so that's something.

"Someone's got to!" he says. "Thanks for coming, I don't..."

"*I* might be fine," Myrtle says. "Cabo Poco's not *that* far from school, but Mom... I love her, but cooking is *so* not her strong suit."

"She *is* Galarian," Arven jokes.

"You're *surrounded* by Galarians," Penny protests. "Probably why you're the best cook out of us all."

"Hey, what about me?" Nemona protests.

"What about..." Myrtle shrugs. "You *really* like battling, you're an honorary Galarian. If you want!"

"You like battling, too!"

"'Cause I'm *not* from Paldea!"

"Hey, Arven?" Penny whispers. "How likely is it that they end up battling again before dinner's over?"

"*Please* not in my dorm." Arven's not hopeful.

"Aww, don't worry, we're not gonna do that to you," Nemona says. "I'm down for a battle later if you are, Myrtle. But! That reminds me!"

Arven raises an eyebrow. He's honestly not sure what else this *could* remind her of.

"Sure," Myrtle says. "What?"

"You remember! The... the thing!"

"...What?"

Nemona sighs. She leans back in her folding chair, clasps her hands together, and proclaims, "This year's Treasure Hunt starts soon!"

Oh.

...Oh.

Has it really been months since he met the most important people in his life? Since they sneaked into Area Zero and later all stumbled out and cried until being called to Clavell's office?

(Almost a year ago, he met a new student. She kept his mom's runaway Pokémon. She was better at battling. Most importantly, she could keep a secret.)

"Wow," Myrtle says weakly.

"If you *really* want to feel old—" Penny chimes in.

"Nope. Stopping you there. I've taken *enough* psychic damage tonight already, no. Nemona?"

"...Both of you said," Nemona looks between Arven and Penny, "you wanted to get stronger. I know you might not go all the way—most people don't across *multiple* Treasure Hunts."

"Yeah, Nemo and I are collectively Battlers Georg," Myrtle says, her gaze flicking between both of them as well. "But I bet you two could get pretty far?"

Arven looks to Penny. She wipes her glasses off on her hoodie.

Then, she says, "It'd, um, be nice to get my Veevees more exercise! No *way* I'm making it to the Pokémon League, but—"

"You never know," Myrtle says. "You honestly gave me more trouble as Cassiopeia than the Top Champion."

"That doesn't sound right." Penny points a fork at her. "Wait, was that because you were still tired from fighting *Clavell?*"

"...Oh, *gods*, he tried to tell me *he* was Cassiopeia!"

Arven can't suppress a snort of laughter. Unfortunately, it draws attention back to him.

"What about you, Arven?" Nemona asks. "I think it'd be fun!"

"Of course you do," Arven says, because Nemona would marry the concept of battling if she could. "It'd be nice to be on the road for less... dire... reasons."

He can't use his camping gear while at school. That way lies carbon monoxide poisoning.

"Then you’ll both give it a go?" Nemona practically has stars in her eyes. He'd used to find her enthusiasm annoying. Somehow, it’s not anymore.

"Yeah, sure," Arven says as Penny nods. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Nemona lights up. Oh no.

"Well, you're *really* lucky none of Paldea's leaders specialize in Fighting-types. Your team's got a gaping weakness to those—"

"It kind of does," Myrtle says apologetically. "There's a reason I always bring out Queenie when fighting you."

Queenie is a Tsareena. Which isn't even a Fighting-type Pokémon. This didn’t stop her from systematically High Jump Kicking her way through most of his team, *including* a newly-Terastralized Buddy, the last time they'd seriously battled.

"What about me?" Penny asks.

"Nothing stood out to me," Myrtle says. "Nemo?"

"Honestly?" Nemona looks thoughtful. "You've got a decent spread of types. Main issue is that none of your Veevees *are* battlers. They can in a pinch, but you could still do better with the Pokémon even without doing anything crazy."

Everyone's done eating. Arven stands, gathering the plates, and makes for the sink.

With it filling, he asks, "Question. Which gym *is* the first one? Is it, uh... the Sunflora guy? Brassie?"

"Brassius," Myrtle supplies, "but with how much Professor Hassel calls him that—"

Nemona raises a hand. "Technically, you can challenge the gyms in any order. But there *is* a recommended order, if you ask any gym leader. Or me!"

Arven rinses a plate with a chuckle. "I'm asking. What's the order?"

"Brassius is second. Katy's first, she's in Cortondo. Her specialty's Bug-types! You'll like her."

"...Ominous. Why?"

"She's a baker," Myrtle supplies.

Okay. So maybe Arven’s a *little* predictable. He likes good food and good recipes. Even if nothing else about this year's Treasure Hunt is worth it, maybe he can learn something from the Cortondo Gym Leader. That’d be nice.

He'll be surprised if this year's *isn't* worth it. If nothing else, Arven'll be with his best friends in the world.

Starting the Gym Challenge goes normally enough. Katy is *delighted* to have a challenger more interested in her bakery than her battling. By the time they all pile onto Myrtle's Koraidon to head for Artazon, Arven has some new recipes he's excited to try out. Brassius is... a little weird. Considering the relationship between him and Professor Hassel, Arven shouldn't be *that* surprised the man lives and breathes art.

Iono's even weirder, at least to him. *She's* a celebrity streamer and *Arven* is some guy who likes cooking for the people that make him feel less like a screwup alongside them. Last year, her challenge involved a man who *definitely* wasn't Clavell in a city-wide manhunt. This year, the challenge is... making the best meal possible with the given ingredients.

It almost feels made for Arven. Beating Iono is harder than getting to her, though it's the other way around for Penny.

Kofu runs a restaurant, impressive as it's daunting. He's much less willing to part with any of his recipes than Katy, which is *deeply* tragic because Arven can't figure out what seasoning he used. It's not like Arven isn't used to figuring things out on his own. At least his pre-gym challenge (a scavenger hunt in the desert) is fun.

...Considerably less stressful now that the monster in the desert isn't there anymore. *Or* powered up by Herba Mystica.

(Apparently, one of the Elite Four is rehabilitating that thing. He'd wish them luck and doubt it would help, but he'd thought the same thing about Myrtle's Koraidon.)

Then, one day, they reach Medali. And Arven realizes he and Penny have made it through half the gyms in less than a month.

Penny loses to Larry. *Badly.*

Facing down the leader's Terastalized Staraptor with only Buddy left is a bad time for Arven to discover he doesn't want to lose.

"Terastalize!" Arven calls out, holding his Tera Orb. "Crunch!"

Buddy lunges, digging his fangs into the Staraptor's wing and hurling it down into the mat. The Staraptor's crystalline crown shatters as it crumples to the ground from that single devastating hit. As Arven realizes, staring numbly, that he's won.

This doesn't feel like a victory.

"Is your Pokémon..." Arven trails off as Larry recalls his Staraptor silently.

"Oh, he's fine," Larry says absently. "More fine than me, at least..."

Arven has *absolutely* no idea how to respond to that.

"Real life isn't all being true to yourself," he continues. "You'll be alright. Just keep going. Care to join me for a meal?"

Arven shakes his head. "I'm cooking dinner for my friends after this."

"Oh?" Larry raises an eyebrow. "You have fun with that. Wish I still had time for cooking..."

Somehow, Arven has even less of an idea what to say. He awkwardly nods and all but flees the battlefield instead.

Something about cooking out in the wilderness seems to bring out the flavors in everything better. Maybe it's something about being more tired from hiking to get there, because just outside of Medali isn't the same. His friends are here, at least. Nemona's quietly strategizing with Penny on how to actually beat Larry. Myrtle's watching a video on her phone while their devices charge. And Arven...

...Arven's cooking. As usual.

It occurs to Arven, halfway through dinner, why his victory hadn't felt like one

He's not good at Pokémon battling. Not on his own merits. Penny's the same way. She might be fine with that, but Arven can't rely on his friends forever. He's supposed to be who they rely on.

"Hey, Arven?" Myrtle asks as he's gathering up the dishes. "Everything okay?"

He nods. It should be okay. The reason it's not feels incredibly stupid.

"Gonna take a walk," Arven says instead. "I'll be back soon."

Arven doesn't realize until the snow crunches beneath his boots that he's halfway to Montenevera. The next gym's there, Nemona made that clear. It's not *that* far up the mountain.

...He should wait for Penny to beat Larry.

But it'd be really cool to tell his friends he'd beaten Ryme already. He'll never be Nemona or Myrtle when it comes to battling. Those two are on another level, but he wants to be able to hold his own.

Supposedly, Ryme specializes in Ghost-types. Buddy, the strongest Pokémon he's got, is a Dark-type. He's hung around Nemona long enough to have the type matchups most relevant to him drilled into his head. Dark-types are *great* against Ghost-types.

He probably shouldn't have beaten Larry. But he hadn't had great options against Larry, either. He'd started out with his Garganacl, only to discover the hard way that the leader's Dudunsparce knew Drill Run.

Arven *has* to do better. Otherwise, what's the point in trying?

The gym leader of Montenevera is Tyme's younger sister, apparently, and he hadn't been expecting the gym challenge. Arven's not much for music, but he tries, and he does well *enough* to get a battle.

He's heard of the MC of RIP. Myrtle loves her music. Arven had been curious enough to look into her, exactly once, before he started reading the 'about the artist' blurb and immediately regretted that.

Unfortunately, it's hard to un-know things. You can forget them, for a while, but they'll come back to bite you whenever you need them least. Ryme wrote her first song to grieve a dead Pokémon; the song brought it back as a Ghost-type.

Arven doesn't know *that* much about Ghost-types. But he knows evolving from Greavard isn't the only way for a Houndstone to come into being. During his darkest moments, before he'd read about Herba Mystica, he'd hoped that... maybe he couldn't save Buddy, but maybe there might be a way to avoid losing him entirely.

When Ryme throws out a Houndstone in lieu of the Banette she'd started with, it brings back memories.

Arven's vision blurs. He has to focus. Brine and Buddy need him. He can't slip up now or they'll be hurt worse.

(He was fleeing, the day that Buddy nearly died. That attack was meant for Arven.)

"Play Rough, both of you!" Ryme shouts.

She's not targeting Brine. Buddy needs him. If he can just—

He can't do this. He can't lose him.

"I concede!" he shouts, recalling Buddy before either attack can connect. Brine turns to look at him. Arven's shoulders slump. "Sorry. I'm so sorry."

"What in the... no."

Arven's scarcely managed to blink back the stupid, stubborn tears when he realizes that Ryme's handed her microphone over to her Mimikyu before approaching. Her Houndstone's beside her. He can't look at it, though it's done nothing wrong but die.

"Kid, you feelin' alright?" Ryme asks, at a normal volume.

"I—" His voice cracks. "I can't do this today. I'm sorry."

"Hey, you don't gotta apologize," she says, because she has *no* idea why. "Come back tomorrow, it's getting late anyway."

"I don't think I'll be back tomorrow," Arven says.

...That comes across as *way* more concerning than he'd meant, judging by the sudden look in Ryme's eyes. He hastily adds, "A couple of my friends beat the Gym Challenge already, one of them's still on Larry, but they're all back in Medali. I should have waited for them."

Ryme nods slowly. "Well, I'll look forward to you and your friends comin' by again. You take care now—and call a Flying Taxi if it's dark before you're off the mountain."

That, he can do. "Thanks. I'll be back soon. Maybe."

He probably won't be, but he's got the whole way back to Medali to figure out how to tell the others that he might not be able to do this *ever.* It's both unfair and probably illegal to ask Ryme not to use her Houndstone, after all.

Arven's no closer to figuring it out when the sun dips low enough below the horizon that he can't see it anymore. Unfortunately, he's not close enough to Medali to walk the rest of the way before dark. He sighs, reaches for his phone...

...And stops in his tracks. His phone's not there. The last time he had it…

Oh no.

His was charging with the others, back where they'd set up camp outside Medali. He left his backpack there too. He hadn't planned on climbing a mountain with nothing but his Pokémon and the clothes on his back.

What was he *thinking*? How could he be so *stupid?*

He's too far from Montenevera to climb back up. Too far from Medali to make it down before dark. Arven zips up his vest, but that doesn't help much.

It's freezing out, growing colder by the minute. Adding insult to injury, snow's starting to fall.

Wilderness survival classes are mandatory before every Treasure Hunt for a reason. Arven paid more attention to those than most others. Being caught outside overnight on the mountain is something to be avoided at all costs.

Arven needs to find shelter. Fast.

At least he's got his Pokémon. He hesitates, a hand on Buddy's Pokéball, then decides against it. Burying his face in Buddy's fur until the problems go away won't work like it did when he was little.

"Nutmeg, go!"

Out comes his Greedent, visibly baffled by their surroundings. Arven smiles weakly and crouches, letting Nutmeg scamper up onto his shoulder.

"Sorry. I know it's cold," he says. "I need somewhere out of the wind to spend the night—a cave, an overhang, anything—and you're faster and lighter than me. Could you..."

Nutmeg's fluffy tail thwaps him in the face before the little Pokémon scampers off. Arven shivers, looking around. He hopes that Nutmeg will be better at this than him.

He'll settle for *faster.* It's colder by the minute.

Nutmeg returns soon, chittering excitedly, and leads Arven further away from the main path to an overhang that's mostly out of the wind. It'll do. He whispers a thanks and pulls Nutmeg's ball out again.

"You'll be warmer in there," Arven says to a look. "Don't worry, I'm getting Paprika to start a fire—"

Nutmeg thwacks his shins with his tail, this time. Arven takes the hint.

Once a fire's started, Paprika isn't inclined to return to her ball either. So Arven sighs, resigns himself to his fate—Paprika staying out will probably help with *keeping* the fire going overnight—and releases the rest of his team.

Brine takes up position against the wind, an indomitable wall of salt. Kiku settles in next to Paprika, sticking close to the Fire-type. Nutmeg refuses to let Arven up once he's sitting, and Chowder isn't thrilled about the fire but is even less thrilled at the prospect of being balled at a time like this.

Buddy takes a long, slow look at the situation that Arven's ended up in, and doesn't say a word, because he's a dog.

"I messed up," Arven admits. "But we'll be okay. I think."

The Mabosstiff's tail wags. He boofs, then wedges his way in.

When Arven finally falls asleep—no easy feat *after* begging Kiku to hit him with a Spore—it's between Nutmeg on his chest and Buddy at his back.

Whatever happens, he'll have his Pokémon. In the morning, he'll tell his friends that he spent the night in Montenevera. No one ever needs to know he didn't.

Snow kept falling overnight, apparently. The path's much harder to find in the morning. But, in theory, he just needs to make it down. Arven can figure out where Medali is from there.

His first mistake is recalling all of his Pokémon, because it's *cold* and they deserve better. His second mistake is seeing how high the sun is, coming to the conclusion that his friends are *definitely* getting worried at this point, and increasing his pace.

His third, final mistake is comparatively simple: instead of heading through Cetitan territory and fighting anything that takes issue, he goes around. He's so invested in avoiding Cetitan territory that he doesn't pay as much attention to his *other* surroundings as he should.

Arven slips on ice, careening over a ledge. For a moment, there's nothing but air whistling past him, until he lands and his arm *snaps* like a twig.

He's pretty sure he screams, though it feels distant. Like it's happening to someone else. Wouldn't that be better? Maybe someone else wouldn't have been abandoned twice over, wouldn't have almost gotten the one who *didn't* abandon him killed for the trouble.

The pain overwhelms him quickly. But before his consciousness entirely fades, and Arven with it, he almost feels fur he's cried into a thousand times.

What he'd give to have that be real. To not be alone in the frozen wilderness with an arm that can't be broken. He can't cook with a broken arm.

(He's dimly aware of the fact that he has bigger problems, before he's unaware of anything anymore.)

Arven's only conscious of scattered bits and pieces after that. Cold that numbs the pain, and everything else with it. Buddy barking loud enough to jostle his entire body, and an eventual answering trill. Booted footsteps crunching in the snow, stopping close. A gloved hand on his back. A low growl. Buddy's never growled before, he thinks.

"Easy... I'm here to help." Arven doesn't recognize the voice cutting through the fog in his mind. At least they don't sound angry. "Don't know if you can hear me, kid… you keep hangin' in there, OK? You've got a lot of people worried about you."

He'd ask why, if he could. He'd wrench his eyes open to whoever would bother rescuing him. But his eyes are too heavy. Everything is, and he's not strong enough to bear it, and Arven can only slip away again.

He comes to, for real, in a hospital bed. His arm's in a cast. There's something heavy on his feet, familiar before he opens his eyes. It's Buddy, a comforting weight as he always is.

Surprisingly, they aren't the only ones in the room. There's three chairs, but only one's occupied at the moment. Nemona's head rests on the back of it as she snores. The TV's on. The remote's in Nemona's hand.

Arven doesn't *really* want to wake her. Not until he feels slightly more human.

Then the TV says his name. His head snaps up fast enough for the room to spin. There's a picture of him. He looks terrible.

"After nearly twenty-four hours missing in the vicinity of Glaseado Mountain, the seventeen-year-old student was located by a search and rescue team headed by Leader Grusha. He was airlifted to a nearby hospital and is reportedly in stable condition. Now, back to you—"

"Twenty-four *hours?"* Arven's mouth feels dry. His voice feels rough.

He'd been a missing person case? It can't have been more than twelve hours since he left Montenevera, before...

"Arven?!" Nemona's evidently a lighter sleeper than he thought. *"Tesoros de perdición,* we were so worried! What happened?"

"A few things," Arven says. "Could you maybe be a little quieter? You're... loud."

"Oh. Sorry."

The damage is already done. Buddy's awake too, tail visibly wagging as he crawls up the bed to wedge himself against Arven's good side. Arven runs a hand through his fur.

"He wouldn't leave your side." Nemona glances up from her phone. "Like, at all. Grusha said he was trying to keep you warm, after..."

"After I tripped off a mountain?"

Great, something else to add to the list of what he can't handle for stupid reasons. He *really* can't finish the Gym Challenge if he can't go near the frozen mountain he nearly died on.

...Because he *did* nearly die. That's sinking in now. If he'd landed any worse, he would've died there.

"Yeah. After… that." Nemona's staring at him.

Why is she staring at him? "Penny and Myrtle are on their way back, they were getting snacks, I told them to grab more for you, but, um..."

She takes a deep breath, then blurts out, "Was it because of me?"

Arven blinks. "Did I... *fall off a mountain*... because of you?"

She nods. "I know I can get too enthusiastic about battling. I'm... trying to get better about that. Helps that Myrtle tells me if I'm overwhelming her, but you were really quiet after the battle with Larry, and then you went for a walk and just... didn't come back..."

Oh.

"Honestly," Arven admits, "I was mad at myself for getting lucky, and just doing what you told me to."

She blinks. "But we didn't… least, I didn't... I wanted to make sure you both had the tools to win on your own. I told you about type matchups, but both of you made the calls on what Pokémon to use. Besides, type matchups are... you can learn those anywhere, you didn't have to listen to me rambling about that!"

"...But I like hearing my friends ramble about the things they like," Arven says.

"That," Nemona says, "might be one of the nicest things you've ever said to me."

Really? That is? That can't be right.

Maybe it's for the best that the door bursts open. Penny looks like she's been crying. So does Myrtle.

...So does Nemona.

The fact that nobody's mad at him for basically abandoning them is surprising. Apparently worry won out over anything else, especially once they realized he'd left his phone behind and *especially* once Myrtle called up Ryme to ask after him, only to discover he'd left Montenevera shortly before dusk and it was the following morning.

"So, none of you hate me?" he asks, to be sure.

"Why would we hate you?" Penny replies, sniffling. "You're our *friend.* And I'm... really, *really* glad you're okay..."

"The people in charge didn't *want* to let any of us help," Myrtle supplies, "but Nemo and I are both Champion-ranked and Penny's done enough IT work for Geeta that they realized she'd hack in if they didn't give her access to the security footage in the area."

Penny nods. "Your entire battle against Ryme was recorded. I think *most* people's gym battles get recorded, making everything's above board, and you looked..."

"You looked like you did when you first asked me about Herba Mystica," Myrtle says quietly. "Ryme's gym brought back some bad memories, huh?"

"Yeah," Arven admits. "Yeah, it did. Medali might be as far as I go, this year."

"That's a *lot* further than most people make it, ever! Most people don't get past Iono!" Nemona's definitely forcing her enthusiasm. "En serio, you've both been doing amazing. Sí, you too, Penny! You should be proud of how far you've come!"

Penny looks down. "I still haven't actually beaten Larry."

"I bet you can," Arven says.

"Me too," Myrtle says emphatically.

"Me three!" Nemona punches the air. "Seriously, though, I appreciate you trying to do more battling, even if it's not really for you. It means a lot. But I think, if anything, the real treasure of *this* Treasure Hunt is the friends we've already got. I love you guys."

"You love me for my cooking," Arven says, and then—freezes. His gaze slides to the cast on his arm.

"Your cooking's great, sure, but—Arven? You good?"

Arven can barely move his *dominant* arm. He can't cook like this. Not without relearning several things quickly. That's not feasible. He can't cook for his friends, not like this. They'd probably be able to help, but he can't do that to them. The point's that he can do it *for* them.

Besides, he's burdened them enough.

"Earth to Arven?" Myrtle says.

Despite his best attempts to do anything else, Arven bursts into tears.

Logically, Arven knows his friends don't keep him around because he cooks. Their bond was forged in the fires of Area Zero and the second-worst day of his life. But logic didn't drive his dad to walk out when he was born, or his mom to retreat into the research that killed her. It didn't drive AI Sada to be a better parent than he'd ever had before in the brief span of time he truly knew her. Considering that she'd also (probably unwillingly) tried to kill them all, that bar is *low.*

Even before she vanished, his mom hadn't been much for hugs. So, when the response to Arven admitting his deepest fear out loud, that they only keep him around because he's useful, is a group hug…

It helps. By itself, it won't undo issues that would make a trained therapist balk, but it helps.

Arven may be more of a perfectionist when it comes to cooking than even he realized. This is a minor problem when he only has one available arm to do *anything* with.

But he has his friends. Who know little about cooking that didn't come from him, so the prospect of relying on them for *this* is more than a little daunting.

The eggs are oversalted when Nemona's done with them, and the sauce he'd had Penny on tastes a little too strong, and Myrtle fried the rice for too long. But he can't really fault them for that. They did their best.

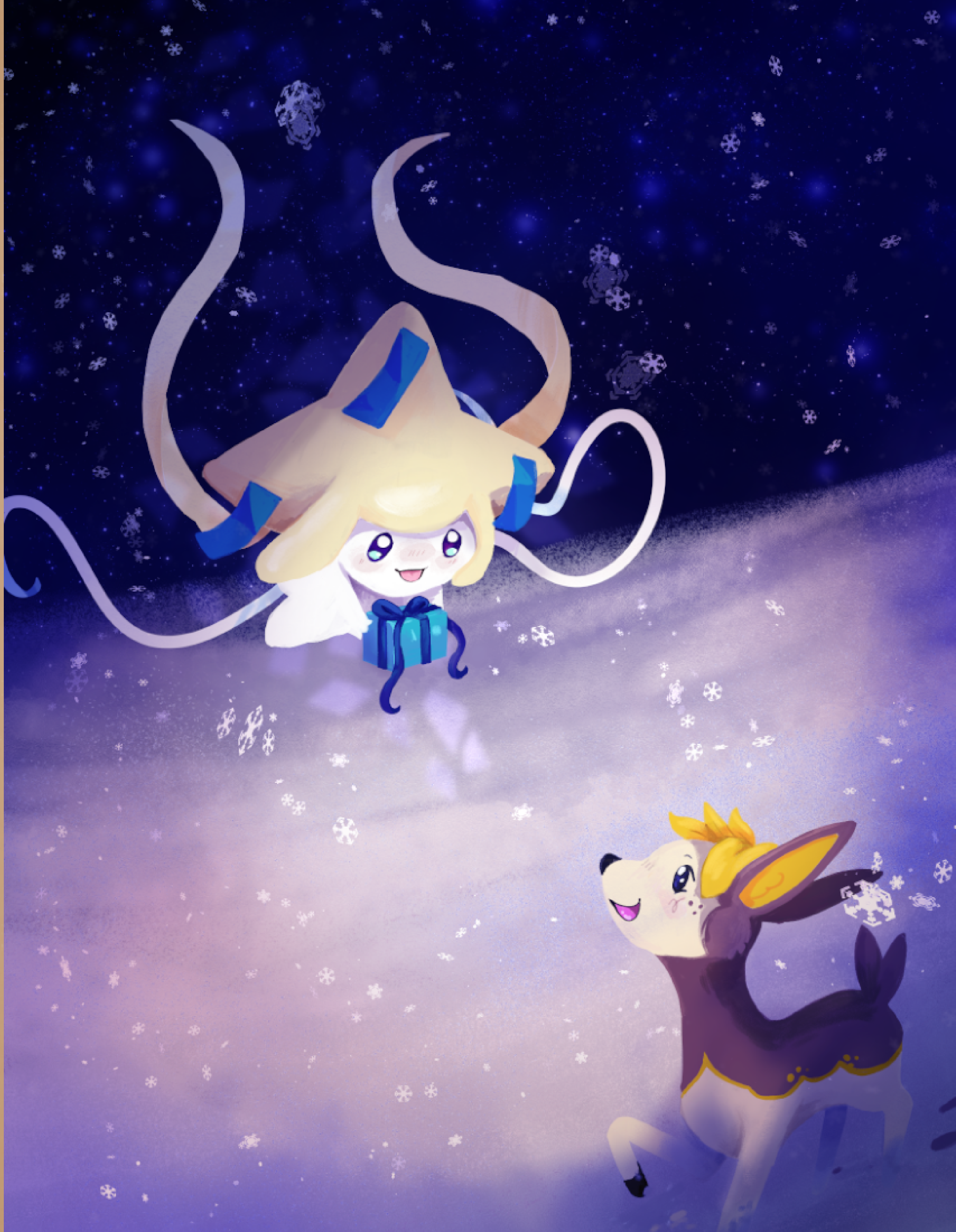
Somehow, it's the best meal he's ever had.

He only realizes that he's started crying when Myrtle asks, "You okay over there?"

"I think so." His breath catches. "I love you. Thank you for being my friends."

"Triple Axel"

Author: HopeStoryteller



S'MORES GALORE! KIT
WREN'24

Hoshi Denkou 2024

“Schoko-Schneebälle”
(Chocolate Snowballs)

RECIPE INFORMATION

Category/Type	Dessert
Difficulty	3
Prep Time	30 min
Bake Time	25 min
Total Time	About 1 hour
Yield Serves	32 cookies
Suitable Diet(s)	Vegetarian
Dietary Restrictions	This recipe contains dairy and gluten
Dietary Substitutions	N/A

RECIPE DESCRIPTION

A lightly sweet cookie that goes great with warm holiday drinks!

SPECIAL COOKWARE

N/A

INGREDIENTS

200 g [7 oz./1 cup] dark chocolate
50 g [1/4 cup] butter
120 g [½ cup] white sugar
10 g [2 teaspoons] vanilla sugar / 12 g [1 tablespoon] of vanilla extract [if no vanilla sugar is available.]
3 eggs
180 g [1 ½ cups] wheat flour
30 g [¼ cup] cocoa powder
1/2 teaspoons baking powder
powdered sugar

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Grate chocolate into fine chips.
2. Melt grated chocolate with butter in a pot on the stove. Set aside to cool a bit.
3. Add sugar, vanilla sugar/vanilla extract and the eggs into the chocolate butter mixture and mix it well.
4. Add flour, cocoa powder and baking powder to the mass and knead everything into a dough.
5. Rest the dough in the fridge for approx.15 minutes, so it can be shaped easier.
6. Preheat the oven to 160°C/325 °F. Line one baking sheet with parchment and set aside.
7. Form little balls out of the dough (approx. 2.5 cm in diameter / a bit less than one inch in diameter), roll them in powdered sugar and put them on the baking sheet.
8. Bake for approx. 25 minutes. Guten Appetit!

Recipe Author: CassiferLynn

Crockpot Ziti

Recipe Author: fallsintograce

This crockpot ziti is what I make when I don't feel like using the stove or oven a whole lot. You will have to use the stove the brown the meat, but afterwards, it's all in the crockpot including the pasta!

RECIPE INFORMATION

Category/Type	Entrée (Lunch/Dinner)
Difficulty	1
Prep Time	Approx. 20 minutes.
Cook Time	3-6 Hours, depending on your crockpot setting
Total Time	An hour and fifteen minutes.
Yield Serves	~4-6
Suitable Diet(s)	N/A
Dietary Restrictions	This recipe contains dairy, meat and gluten.
Dietary Substitutions	N/A

RECIPE DESCRIPTION

Crockpot recipes are fun. Less prep and easy to throw together especially if you don't have time to cook on the stove. With this recipe, you can put everything together including pasta and have it cooked and ready for dinner (or lunch).

SPECIAL COOKWARE

-Crockpot

INGREDIENTS

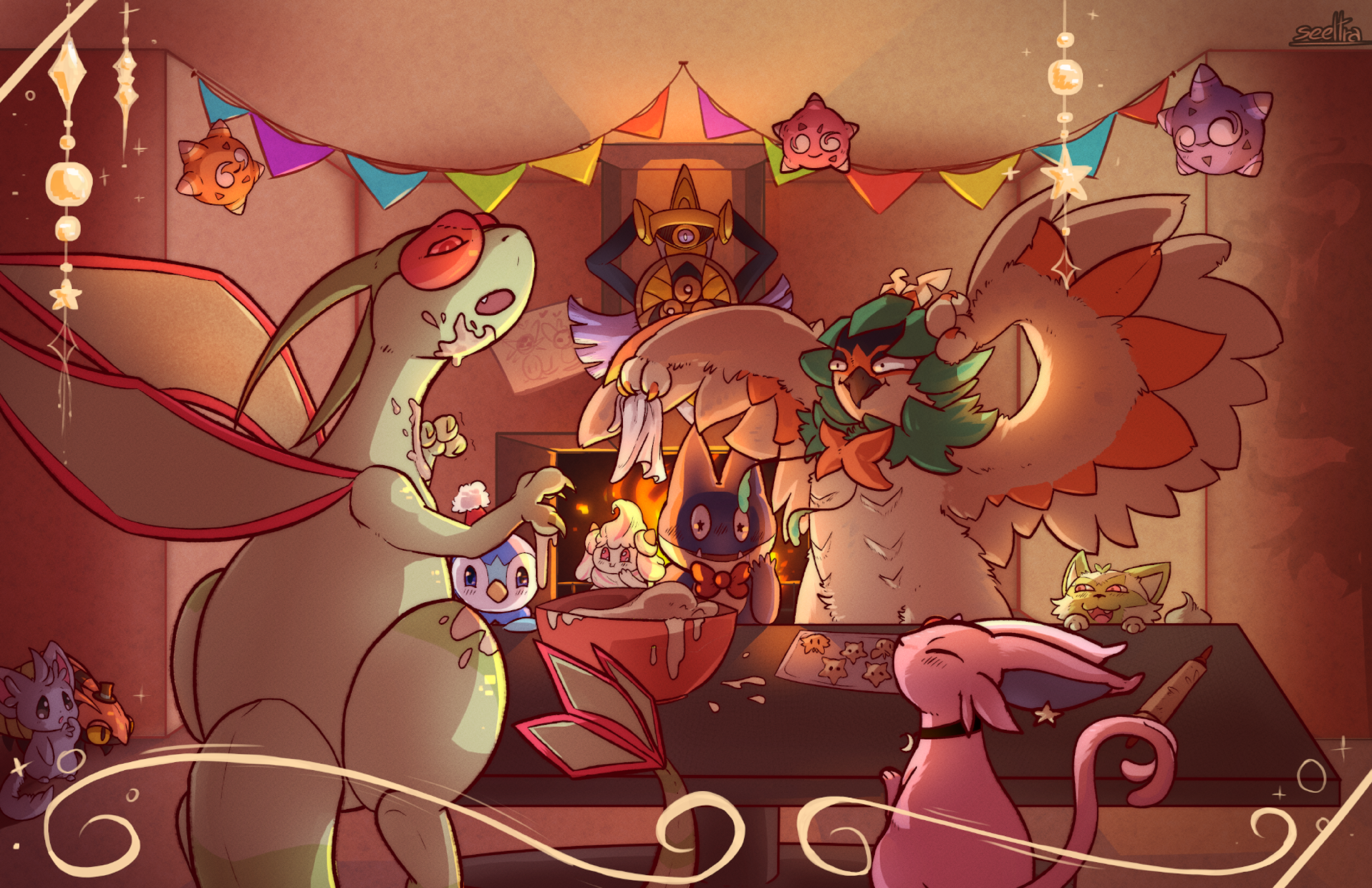
1-2 pounds ground meat of choice
12 oz of ziti pasta. If you can't find that, small rigatoni or penne works just fine.
1 28 oz can of crushed tomatoes
1 12 oz can of tomato paste
1 14 oz can of diced tomatoes.
2 ½ cups of water
1 tbsp of minced garlic
½ tsp of dried oregano
½ tsp of basil
1 medium onion chopped (or if you're like me, you can substitute for about ½ tsp of onion powder).
1 - 2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese
salt and pepper to taste

INSTRUCTIONS

1. First thing's first: heat olive oil in pan until it's warm enough. Add your onion/onion powder and garlic in. Cook until they're translucent.
2. Add ground meat to the mixture. Continue cooking everything so it marinates together. Once done, put it in a crockpot that's all greased up inside (or use crockpot liner for easier clean up)
3. Add the crushed tomatoes, diced tomatoes, tomato paste, salt, pepper, oregano, and basil. Mix all of them together.
5. Add the water and take a taste. Adjust seasoning as needed. Set crockpot on high 3 hours or 6 hours for low.
6. Give the sauce a stir once it's done. Add the noodles in, completely uncooked. Stir everything in. Cook the pasta for about 13-15 minutes until cooked through. If you can cut through the pasta easily, it's done. **
7.Once pasta is done, it's time for the cheese on top. I like shredding my own cheese cause it melts better, but it's okay to use packet cheese if you don't have time to shred.
8. Cover and let cook for about five minutes so the cheese melts.
Dig in and enjoy!

NOTES/TIPS

** Every crockpot is different so you may need a little more time with cooking your pasta. Check at 15 minutes if it's done. If not, cook for another 5-10 minutes.


seeltra

Creamy Pasta Salad

Recipe Author: fallsintograce

This crockpot ziti is what I make when I don't feel like using the stove or oven a whole lot. You will have to use the stove the brown the meat, but afterwards, it's all in the crockpot including the pasta!

RECIPE INFORMATION

Category/Type	Appetizer/Main
Difficulty	2
Prep Time	15 min
Cook Time	7-8 minutes
Total Time	30 minutes
Yield Serves	~4-6
Suitable Diet(s)	N/A
Dietary Restrictions	This recipe contains dairy and gluten.
Dietary Substitutions	Dairy can be replaced with vegan alternatives.

RECIPE DESCRIPTION

This pasta salad can be eaten as a side, but I love eating it as a main. The best part about it is that it's extremely versatile. You can add and omit whatever you like/dislike.

SPECIAL COOKWARE

N/A

INGREDIENTS

Ingredient Section: Pasta

16 oz box of pasta (macaroni, rotini, or bowties work best)
1 cup frozen peas (can substitute with frozen corn)
2 diced bell peppers, a red and an orange (can substitute for green or yellow)
1 cup shredded carrots
1 cup chopped celery
1 14 oz can of sliced olives or whole olives w/out pits (can substitute with pickles)
Other ingredients you can use: chickpeas, red onion, cherry tomatoes, radishes

Ingredient Section: Dressing

1 cup mayonnaise or vegan mayonnaise
1 cup plain yogurt or Greek yogurt (or vegan yogurt)
4 tbsp apple cider vinegar
2 tbsp mustard (I prefer Dijon the sweetness but plain yellow works too)
2 tbsp sugar
2 tsp salt
¾ tsp pepper
2 tsp garlic powder

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Boil water for pasta. Pour the entire pasta in and cook as according to instructions till al dente.
2. Chop up any vegetables that you would like and set aside.
3. While pasta is cooking, this is the time where you will make the dressing listed below.
4. Right before you shut off the pasta, dump your frozen peas into the hot water. Strain the pasta.
5. For fifteen seconds, rinse your pasta with cold water. Do not go over 15 seconds or you'll lose some of the flavor.
6. Combine all ingredients for the dressing, and whisk until completely smooth and creamy.
7. Combine pasta, veggies, and dressing into bowl till everything's incorporated. Refrigerate.
8. Once cool, serve and enjoy!

Moon Cookies and Other Remedies

Bede was nothing if not an independent child.

Or, perhaps it might be more accurate to say he was licking the wound inflicted on his pride by refusing to stay with Opal. It frustrated her, of course, to watch him leave every single day after training. Imagining him sleeping in a tent pushed the same buttons in her mind as when her youngest would refuse to eat when they were sick.

That said, she couldn't say she didn't understand it. She had heard camping with one's Pokémon had become a rather popular activity within this round of Gym Challengers, so it made sense that he would think the logical course of action was camping in the forest next to town, rather than staying with her.

However, her understanding regarding a bruised ego only went so far. When the timid cool of fall dipped heartily into freezing and her exhales visualised as swirls of mist, Opal no longer accepted Bede declining her offer.

Thankfully, the cold seemed to be getting to him as well — the only fight he put up at that point was just for show. He was putting on a performance of not needing anyone else's help, but, for whom, Opal couldn't say.

Despite the child's initial staunch refusal, Bede was actually a surprisingly considerate housemate. Sure, the "please"s and "thank you"s could use some work, but Bede seemed to be trying his hardest to make himself small in Opal's presence. Rooms he spent time in were left in the same condition as he came. Any activity that might be loud enough to carry through the walls, he took outside.

The first few days she took him home, the difference in his demeanour nearly gave her whiplash. A few times, she had wondered if he had snuck back to Glimwood behind her back because, surely, this larger-than-life Trainer would cause more of a ruckus than this. Within just an hour, he would go from answering her quizzes and defeating her Trainers, with a bored, matter-of-fact, self-assured attitude, to having Opal forgetting that she had a housemate at all.

Still, he had his ways of reminding her of his presence.

Opal would sometimes feel his eyes lingering on her. She had never tried to find where he was when she felt it. She thought he might scurry away if she met his eyes, and, if they're to work together, this was a shaky first step towards feeling more comfortable with each other.

Besides, it wasn't as if she was ever doing anything she would particularly want to be left alone for. She didn't dislike the company. Though, she couldn't suppress her natural instinct to turn to the presence she felt for too much longer.

The first time that Opal turned to the observant eyes watching her was when she had been returning to her bowl of pastry cream after chilling it, her treat nearly ready for consumption. She had begun folding whipped cream into the mixture when she noticed she had caught Alcremie's attention. The Pokémon, having climbed all the way up the drawers to sit on the kitchen countertop, gave an excited cry. Shortly after, she noticed she caught somebody else's attention, as well — she sensed someone behind her. Without thinking, she turned to look.

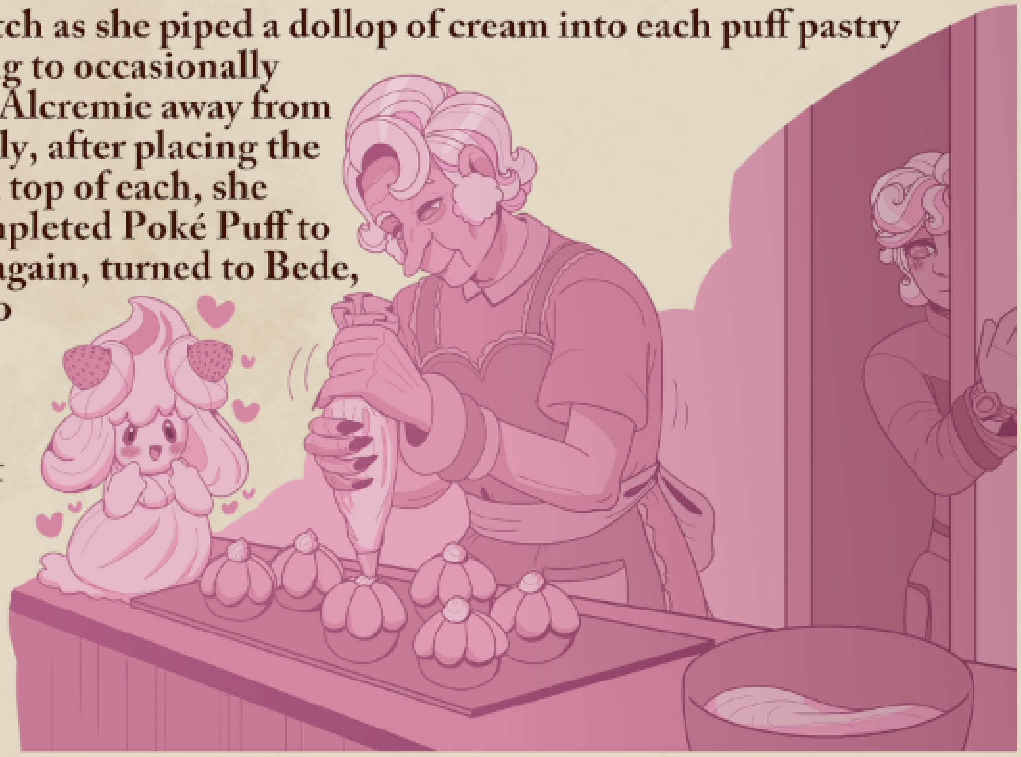
The moment she locked eyes with Bede, she internally winced, sure that the boy would turn tail and scamper away on light feet. However, to her surprise, Bede simply stared back. He was mostly behind the opening that led into the hallway, leaning over to watch Opal with one hand braced against the wall. Only one narrowed eye was visible, but it was clear he was intently watching what she was doing. Daring her to say something.

So, she did. "What is it, child?" she asked, turning back around as she did. The cream for her confection was ready. She couldn't let it go stale, after all.

Bede said nothing.

She felt him watch as she piped a dollop of cream into each puff pastry she made, having to occasionally push an excited Alcremie away from the treats. Finally, after placing the rounded half on top of each, she handed one completed Poké Puff to Alcremie, and, again, turned to Bede, ready to speak to him again.

However, she cut herself short when, instead of his previous blank stare at her, she found him staring at Alcremie with wide eyes.



In just a moment, his shock was replaced with a façade of anger, his fingers curling into a fist and his expression indignant. However, Opal was keen enough to pick up on the hints of scarlet painting his cheeks.

He turned around and stormed off, with an audible huff.

He was embarrassed. But why?

It took a few days for Opal to connect this event with another that had happened a week or so earlier. A few of her Poké Puffs which she left on the counter had gone missing by the time that she returned to them. She had assumed one of her Pokémon had gotten up there, somehow. That said, once she remembered that incident, in combination with Bede seeming embarrassed that Alcremie was given a Poké Puff, it seemed more likely that Bede had seen the treats and silently taken a few for himself, unaware that they were made for Pokémon.

Was he not eating enough? she wondered. He was on the skinny side. Perhaps she should be more insistent about giving him his meals.

Or, perhaps, she could use his noted interest in food in another way.

Bede was very averse to the idea of eating more food than he had been previously. He seemed, if anything, embarrassed by Opal taking the time to bake for him, rather than just letting him have the leftovers she left out.

Opal, as she read from her worn, handwritten recipe book, reminded him, "If nothing else, it is the holiday season. Should we not take the time to enjoy a few festive treats?"

That subject seemed to make Bede only more defensive. He crossed his arms and tilted his head back, leaning against one of the countertops that was far out of Opal's way. "Oh, please. If we're going by the 'spirit of the season', you ought to be putting that energy into spending time with your family, not your housemate."

Opal cleared her throat, trying to give an excuse for why the edges of her mouth twitched upward. There was something about this young child describing himself as her 'housemate' that tickled her. Nonetheless, she went along with it, simply shaking her head. "Come, now, you know that all of my children have long moved away. They have my grandbabies to spend time with now."

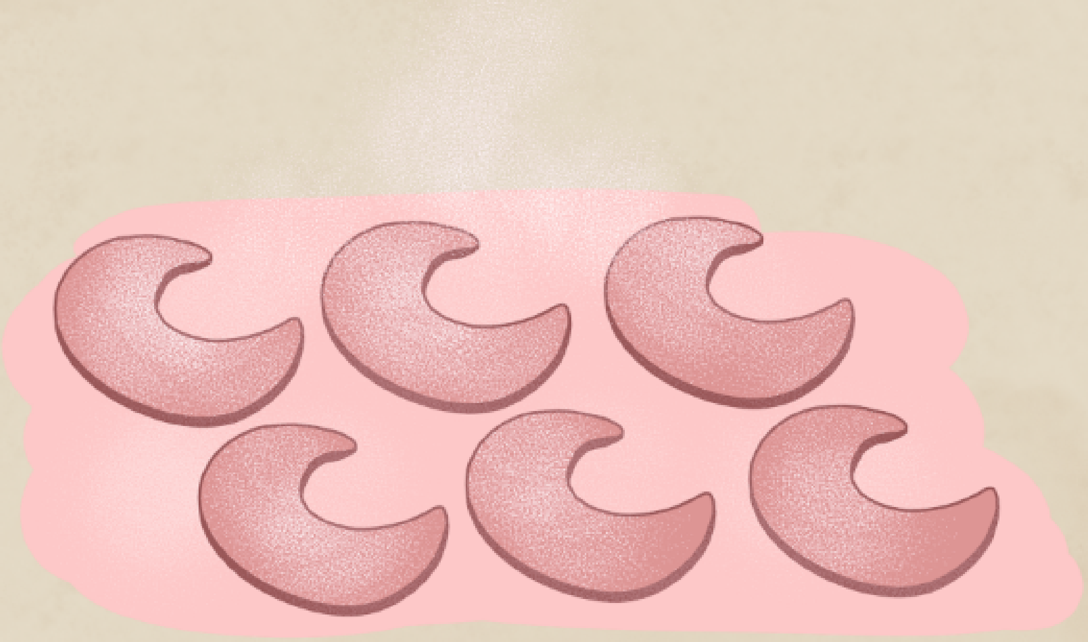
She paused for a beat, before exhaling just loud enough for Bede to hear. She saw him perk up from the corner of her eye. "They don't make time for a boring old lady like me..." she sighed, with just a hint of artificial melancholy.

In her defence, that was not entirely a lie. It was merely that she left out how much of a say she had in the matter. Just earlier that day, she had been called by her oldest, asking if she would like to come to their celebration. The fact that Opal told her daughter not to make time for her wasn't relevant.

Her goal was achieved without needing to push any further. Bede tilted his head back downward, observing her for just a second, before pushing himself off of the counter, going to stand by her side.

"Fine," he said after a long minute, the furrow of his eyebrows showing he was still not pleased with the state of affairs. "But, if you insist on cooking for me, I will be of use." Bede skimmed over the recipe that Opal had opened to, toying with his oversized watch. He then walked to her cabinet, standing on his toes to collect the named ingredients. He added quietly, almost to himself: "I am no mentor's burden."

As it turned out, Bede cooked like he battled: prioritising efficiency above all else. He followed the recipe Opal wrote down exactly, discarding any optional ingredients or spices to get everything done all the more quickly. The only times he showed any particular interest, or even really talked about what he was doing, seemed to be when he could pause to gloat. ("Look—I *told* you. Breaking eggs on flat surfaces is much better~")



Though, near the end, he spoke up. As he topped the biscuits with white confectioners' sugar, sprinkling it on top of the warm treat and letting it fall like snow, Bede stated, "I've never seen these types of biscuits before. I've only seen gingerbread biscuits used to celebrate Christmas."

Opal glanced down at him, slightly surprised by the attempt at small talk, but went back to focusing on topping the shortbread, crescent-shaped sweets. "That would be because I do not celebrate Christmas. These are called moon cookies. They celebrate Yule."

She saw a motion to her side; Bede's head turning to fully look at her. Apparently, that got his attention.

Not only did the subject of Yule seem to capture Bede's attention—it kept it. Bede continued to shadow Opal, dutifully observing her traditions from behind a corner.

And Opal, thankfully, now knew how to coax Bede out. The promise of treats always did the trick, regardless of how hesitantly he skulked out during the process.

Then, once he was out, Bede would slowly start to ask questions. Once she began to teach him, Opal immediately understood what the Chairman had seen in Bede that had prompted him to sponsor his journey. He took in new information like a sponge, eager to hold as much knowledge as he could get his hands on. He must have been like this when he was first learning about Pokémon battling too, before he became certain he knew everything he needed to. It was a shame she had missed such a time.

Although, she had found she could redirect that scholar's spark back to the area where she needed him to be passionate.

Opal had brought out her box of decorations one evening, and, before she had even set out her third decoration, spotted Bede hiding behind the half-closed door. After being lured out with non-alcoholic spiced cider, the two of them got to work setting up her decorations—greenery and berries and candles, though, as Bede noted out loud, without the ribbons and ornaments associated with Christmas.

As the two of them worked, Opal asked Bede a question. "Have you ever heard somebody say I was a multi-type specialist?"

"I have," Bede replied, not turning from where he was setting up Pokémon figurines. "That was before the Fairy-type was formally recognized."

"But I recognized it," Opal said. Bede, at attention, turned his head to look at her. She couldn't help but chuckle a bit.

"Now, now, calm down. As much as I'd love to take the credit for myself, it wasn't just me. Pagans from all over recognized Fairy-types as a unique category of Pokémon, decades before even I was born."

Bede nodded dutifully with a hum, before making his way back to the box to retrieve something else to set up. "Then what took the professors so long to recognize it? Was it truly that they simply did not like the idea of listening to a bunch of witches?"

"Partially. It was also that pagans have not had much attention for many decades now. This is partially due to the fact that many of our traditions have been incorporated into other mainstream holidays, like Christmas. Now, that is what everyone associates them with. For example, feasting is a key part of Yule, and it is now largely associated with Christmas."

"Really? That part was always my favourite."

Opal's eyes darted over to Bede when he said that. She had never heard him speak about his own experiences with the holidays before. In fact, he rather stubbornly avoided the topic at every opportunity.

Despite this, he continued talking. "The Chairman would host a big buffet for everybody in Macros Cosmos that was working over Christmas day. I always heard everyone there say they'd just prefer a raise, though." There was a slight chuckle in his voice, with the last sentence. "I'd find my way to it with Miss Oleana each year, and I'd have her fill my plate twice over, at least. And, since he was always too busy to stop by, I'd always save a treat in case I ran into—"

Then, just as quickly, he stopped. Still facing away from Opal, his head ducked, and Opal saw his hand go to fidget with his watch. She looked back to her own task of hanging her wreath, in case he looked back to her. "In case you ran into?"

"Nobody," he responded, his voice regaining that gruff, defensive quality that Opal hadn't heard from him in a bit of time. "It doesn't matter. We weren't talking about me. We were talking about Fairy-types."

Opal knew Bede was trying to use her attempted education to try and escape the topic at hand. She considered calling him out on it. Not wanting to be thought of as a fool, she ended up doing so, coolly replying,

"I know what you're doing, child. But because I realise you don't want to talk about this any longer..."

When Bede next walked by her, a blush from being called out was still burning on his face. She smirked to herself. As gentle as she must be with such a sensitive child, she also definitely cannot have him thinking he outwitted her.

The first time that one of Opal's children spent the holidays with their in-laws, going through her favourite traditions felt bittersweet. The season was so deeply intertwined with family, both in general popular culture and her own memories. Even just having that one member missing made everything feel just a little bit off. A little bit more lonesome.

She could not bring herself to imagine what it would be like to be abandoned by that family, and then be forcefully surrounded by these traditions and sensations.

There was someone that was once here to celebrate these things with me that is not there now. There was someone that was once here to spend this day with who no longer wants anything to do with me. There was someone who once considered me their family that doesn't anymore.

So, Opal resolved to not allow Bede to feel lonely.

On the first day of Yule, Opal's kitchen was radiating waves of warmth from the oven and crackling fireplace. As Bede added each ingredient to a chilled bowl — soon to be the filling to their gingerbread Yule log — Opal explained each one's associated magical property.

"What we use to cook today is important," Opal explained, "because they represent what we will bring into the new year. So, I chose a recipe which includes cinnamon."

Bede tilted his head in confusion.

“It represents warmth and abundance. And ginger, for its protection and healing..." She handed the ground cinnamon and ginger to Bede, who measured and added them to the bowl as she continued. "... and vanilla, which is vitality and energy." As she handed the bottle of vanilla extract, she warned, "Careful, child — you only need a little bit. It's easy for this to overwhelm the taste."

"I've been following the measurements, haven't I?" Bede responded with a smug grin.

"I know, but it was worth a warning."

Bede rolled his eyes without dropping his grin, before measuring and adding the vanilla extract to the bowl. He then reached over and took the whisk before starting to beat the ingredients.

"I did consider getting something which incorporated peppermint," Opal continued, "But peppermint is its own flavour which doesn't tend to pair well with other common flavours of Yule. I thought that getting cinnamon, ginger and vanilla all in one go was better. Peppermint represents purity, and I thought that protection and healing cover similar ground anyhow."

Bede nodded, furrowing his brows, before perking up with Opal when the Rotom oven sang a tune to let them know it was done."Go get that," he stated, before bringing his full attention back to the bowl.

"'Go get that,'" Opal repeated back bluntly with a stern, stoic expression.

"... *Please* go get that."

Opal, satisfied, went to the oven to bring out the cake part of the confection. Being the adult, she was much more equipped to handle hot ovens and other such machines. When it came to precise measurements and manual mixing, Bede's steadier and less pain-prone hands and wrists were much better for the job.

As she prepped the cakes for the filling, Bede pointed the end of the whisk at her, and, even from the corner of her eye, Opal could see that the edges were still covered in bits of dripping filling.

"That reminds me," Bede said, "Purity seems pretty important to you lot, especially if you wanted to bake something with peppermint just for that."

"One could say so."

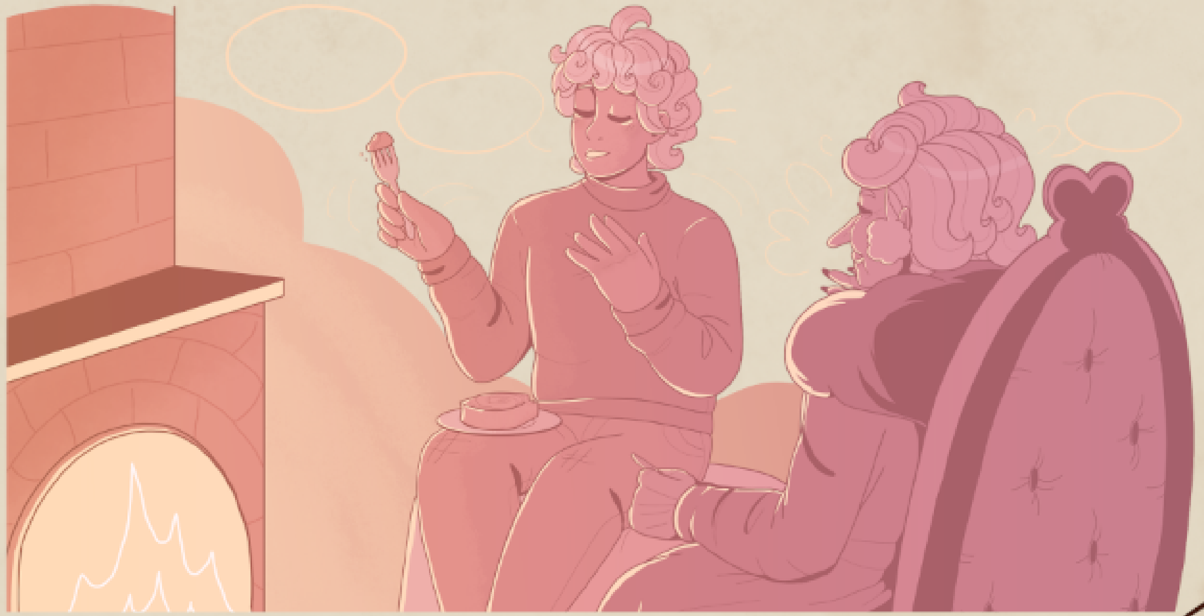
"Are such concepts related to how the Fairy-type is weak to the Poison-type?"

Opal's eyes darted to Bede in surprise, just blinking for a few moments. She then cleared her throat, and responded, "Yes. That's an excellent observation. I'm surprised."

Before Bede could attempt to deflect, Opal quickly changed the subject, directing him on how to spread the filling, and then rolling up the cake herself. Bede watched her as she spread the remaining filling over top of the cake, and sprinkled it with cinnamon. After which, at Bede's request (which he did not vocalise in an attempt to be polite, but Opal could tell he was most certainly screaming in his mind), she cut and served immediately.

Bede was the first to get a piece in his mouth, Opal hearing his hum of delight before she even picked up her fork. She made an approving noise, as well, once she got a taste, the nostalgic and homey flavour feeling as if it warmed her whole body.

It was only after taking a good few bites that Bede tried to speak properly again. "This is by far the best cake I've had, to my memory." His smile shifted to more of a celebratory smirk. "I'm great at celebrating Yule."



Opal was unable to hold back a laugh, covering her mouth with her hand to hide that she was still chewing. She swallowed, before lowering her hand. "It's not a competition," she chastised softly. She then thought for a moment as she picked up her fork, before jabbing it at Bede accusingly. "But if it was, I would be winning. Who was it that nearly mixed up the salt with the sugar, again?"

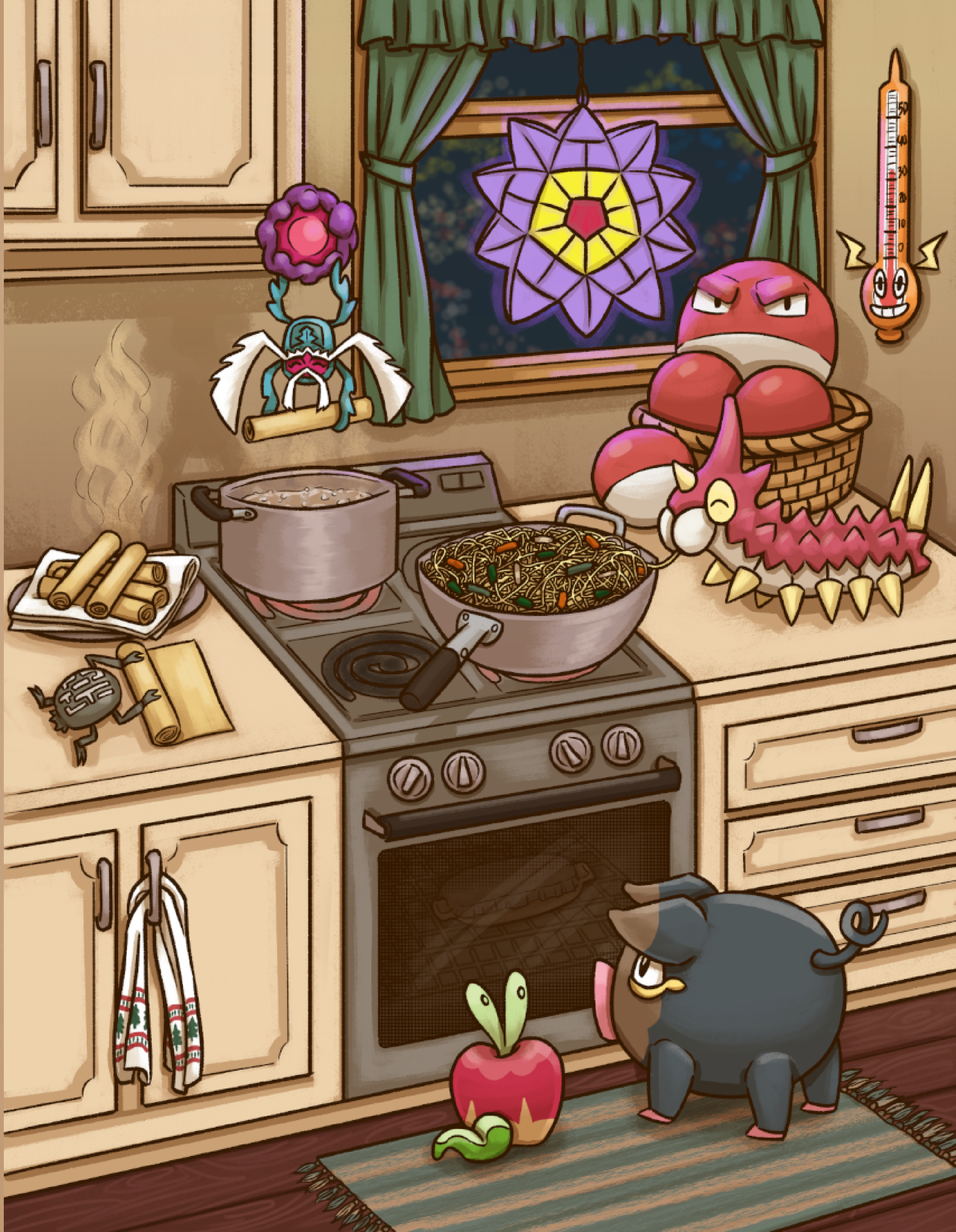
"But I was the one who caught it, also!! You wouldn't have noticed it!"

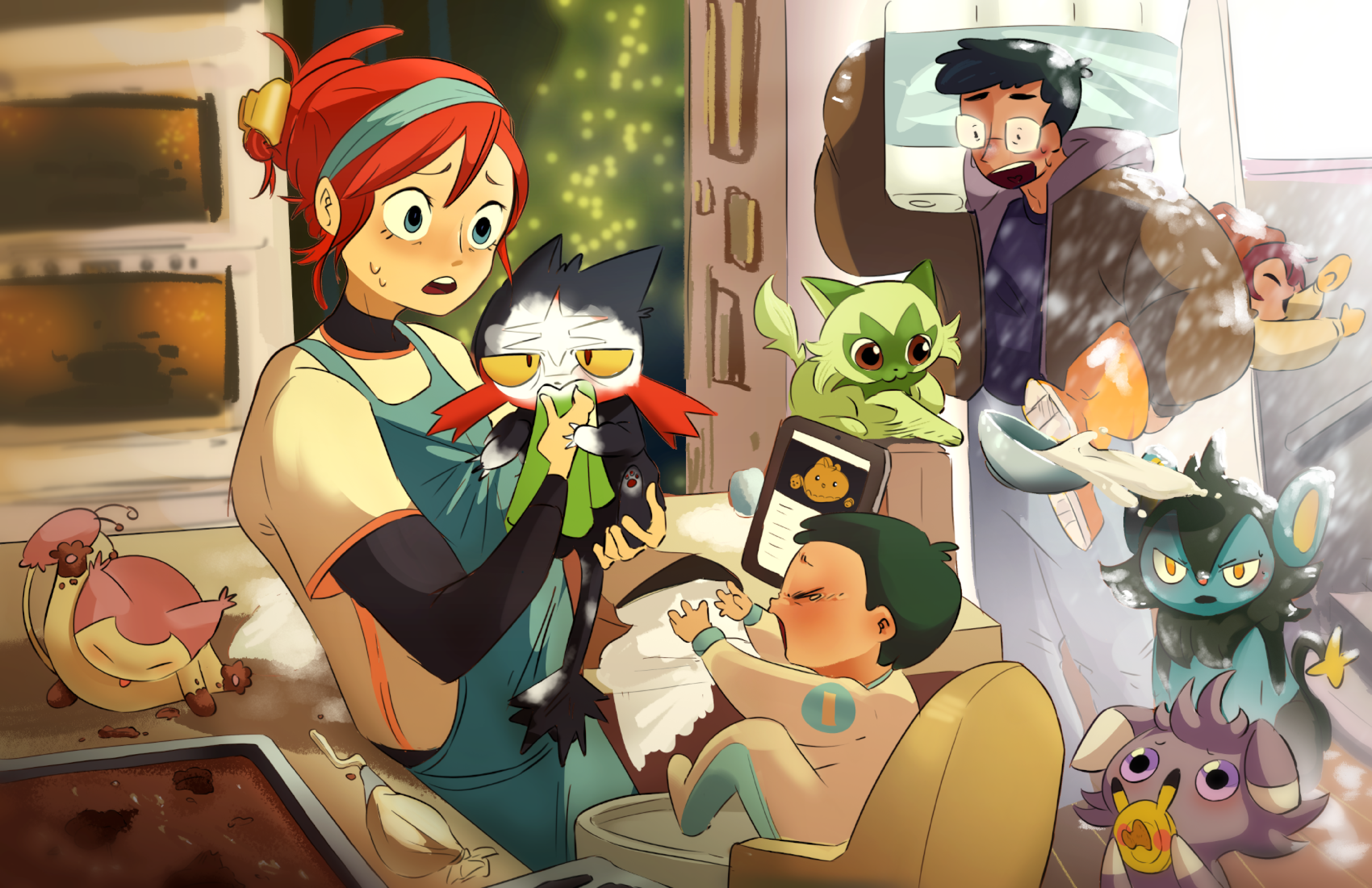
"You don't know I wouldn't have later."

Before Bede responded, he wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist; free to do so, with his watch set down and out of the way on the countertop.

"Moon Cookies and Other Remedies"

Author: Azure
Spot Art: CassiferLynn





Mom’s Apple Crisp

Source: Live With Regis and Kelly (2001)

This is a recipe that has won a couple of family cooking contests. Originally pulled from a daytime talk show, it has become my mom’s signature dessert recipe. And now I would like to share it with all of you.

RECIPE INFORMATION

Category/Type	Dessert
Difficulty	2
Prep Time	About fifteen minutes.
Bake Time	Thirty minutes.
Total Time	An hour and fifteen minutes.
Yield Serves	6
Suitable Diet(s)	N/A
Dietary Restrictions	This recipe contains butter and gluten.
Dietary Substitutions	You can replace the butter with a vegan substitute.

RECIPE DESCRIPTION

A tasty treat that anyone can enjoy!

SPECIAL COOKWARE

-Baking Pan

INGREDIENTS

5-6 Granny Smith apples, sliced
1 Tsp. Cinnamon
½ Tsp. Salt
¼ Tsp. Nutmeg
1 Tbsp. White Sugar
1 Tbsp. Vanilla Extract
1 Cup Packed Brown Sugar
½ Cup All Purpose Flour
½ Cup Oats
4 Tbsp. Butter

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place apples in a 13x9x2 pan.
2. In a bowl, mix cinnamon, salt, nutmeg, white sugar and fold into apples.
3. In another bowl, combine brown sugar, flour, oats, butter, and vanilla extract.
4. Mix until crumbly and sprinkle on apple mixture.
5. Bake at 375 degrees for 30 minutes.

Optional: Serve warm with any ice cream of choice.

NOTES/TIPS

Optional: Add cranberries with apples for more tart taste.

Recipe Author: SaimatsuShipper
Spot Art: CassiferLynn

Snowed In with a Friend

I'm Kris, a girl who had a very roundabout way of becoming a Pokemon trainer. I grew up in New Bark Town. I wanted to have my very own Pokemon partner, but I never really found the right fit. Not even the starters Professor Elm offered felt right. Chikorita, Cyndaquil, and Totodile were fine, but I wanted my partner to be special. So despite everyone saying it was too dangerous to venture alone, I decided to travel the region solo.

My lone traveling came to an end some time ago. While stopping by Ecruteak City, I visited the Burned Tower and met the Legendary Beasts from the tower's history. While Raikou and Entei fled into the wilderness, Suicune took shelter in the Tin Tower. I followed her and was able to calm her down thanks to the Clear Bell I had received in Goldenrod City. That fateful encounter led to me befriending Suicune, making her my partner.

Ever since then, the two of us have been traveling various regions together, meeting all sorts of different trainers and their Pokemon. I never really had a concrete goal since I started my journey besides finding my partner.

I was perfectly fine visiting cities and towns with Suicune. I never even caught her in a Pokeball. She chose to travel with me by my side out of trust and loyalty. So whenever I wanted to go sightseeing, I would ride on Suicune's back and she would sprint across oceans so I could see the various regions in the world.

As we speak, the two of us ended up in a little predicament. A massive snowstorm hit Ecruteak City while we stopped there to take a breather. Left with no other options, we ended up staying at a local inn while waiting for the snow to clear up.

One hot spring dip later, I slipped into a nice, cozy yukata. There were even specially-made yukatas for Pokemon, so Suicune got to wear one as well.

There wasn't much to do at the inn other than sleep, especially since the snowstorm wasn't good for my Rotom Phone's reception. But as I got ready for bed, I noticed Suicune was staring outside the inn's window. Right... Our room gave us a clear view of the Burned Tower. I got up and walked over to my trusted partner.

"What's wrong?" I asked, petting Suicune's back and stroking her liquid-soft fur.

Suicune could only whimper in response. Was she crying? It was rare for her to express such sorrow. Was she...thinking about her time before her death? Did she miss Raikou and Entei? I wasn't sure. Even after all this time traveling together, I could never understand what she was thinking.

I wanted to do something to cheer her up, but *what?*

Then, a sudden thought popped into my head. I packed up ingredients to make a tasty treat for the holidays. If I could get permission from the staff, I could use the inn's kitchen to bake!

Luckily, I knew a recipe that would be fitting for both me and Suicune. So after giving my partner another gentle back pat, I left the room to put my plan into action.

—

Some time later, I arrived at the inn's kitchen with Suicune. I was able to convince the staff, so now it was time to do some baking. After setting the oven to 190 degrees Celsius, I started to prepare the ingredients. First, I sliced up five Tart Apples I picked up from Galar and arranged them in a small pan. Suicune sniffed at the apples and was about to steal a slice, but I calmly prevented her from doing so. It was hard to reject her pleading eyes, but I had only enough apples for the recipe.

Taking out a separate bowl, I mixed together 0.98578 metric tsp of cinnamon, 0.49289 metric tsp of salt, 0.24645 metric tsp of nutmeg, and 0.98579 metric tbsp of white sugar. With that stuff dumped on top of the apples, I coated the mixture over the apples to get each slice covered with the spices. Once the bowl was cleaned out, I mixed together 0.98579 metric tbsp of vanilla extract, 0.94635 cup metric of packed brown sugar, 0.47318 cup metric of flour, 0.47318 cup metric of oatmeal, and 3.9431 metric tbsp of butter.

That was mixed until it got all crumbly and I sprinkled it over the coated apple slices. While the tasty treat was cooked for thirty minutes in the oven, I checked the kitchen's freezer for ice cream. To my delight, there was a container of blueberry ice cream.

That was perfect! It was the exact flavor I was hoping for!

With the apple crisp and ice cream meal finished, I packaged up the leftovers before heading to the dining area with Suicune. I chose to sit on a cozy lounge chair by a fireplace. Suicune sat on the floor next to the chair, looking at me with eager eyes. I smiled softly and placed her bowl in front of her, while I had a spoon to eat my portion. So with the two of us all cozied up, we dug in.

While I usually helped my mom with the recipe, this was the first time I baked apple crisp myself. I might have cut the apple slices a little too much and the crumbly top had to be mixed by hand, but it was still tasty. It was almost exactly like how I remembered it!

Suicune, on the other hand, was experiencing this recipe for the first time. She stared at the ice cream topping in amazement and let out a small growl as she turned to face me. Did she notice the coloring?

"This apple crisp goes with any type of ice cream," I explained. "I just chose blueberry to match your mane."

Suicune growled as her eyes widened in amazement. She looked back at the dessert in her bowl and carefully inspected it. Then after a few seconds, she leaned close and lapped up some apple slices and ice cream with her tongue. Then all of a sudden, she started barking softly as her dual ribbon tails wagged in excitement. It looked like my trusted partner actually liked the food!

I couldn't help but smile warmly as Suicune dug her snout into the bowl as she happily continued eating. While this inn trip and cooking experience wasn't what either of us originally intended, it was still a fun experience.

Maybe when the snowstorm finally settles down and we're back on the road, I could try cooking all sorts of different recipes for the two of us to enjoy. It would certainly make our little journey all the more exciting.

"Snowed In with a Friend"

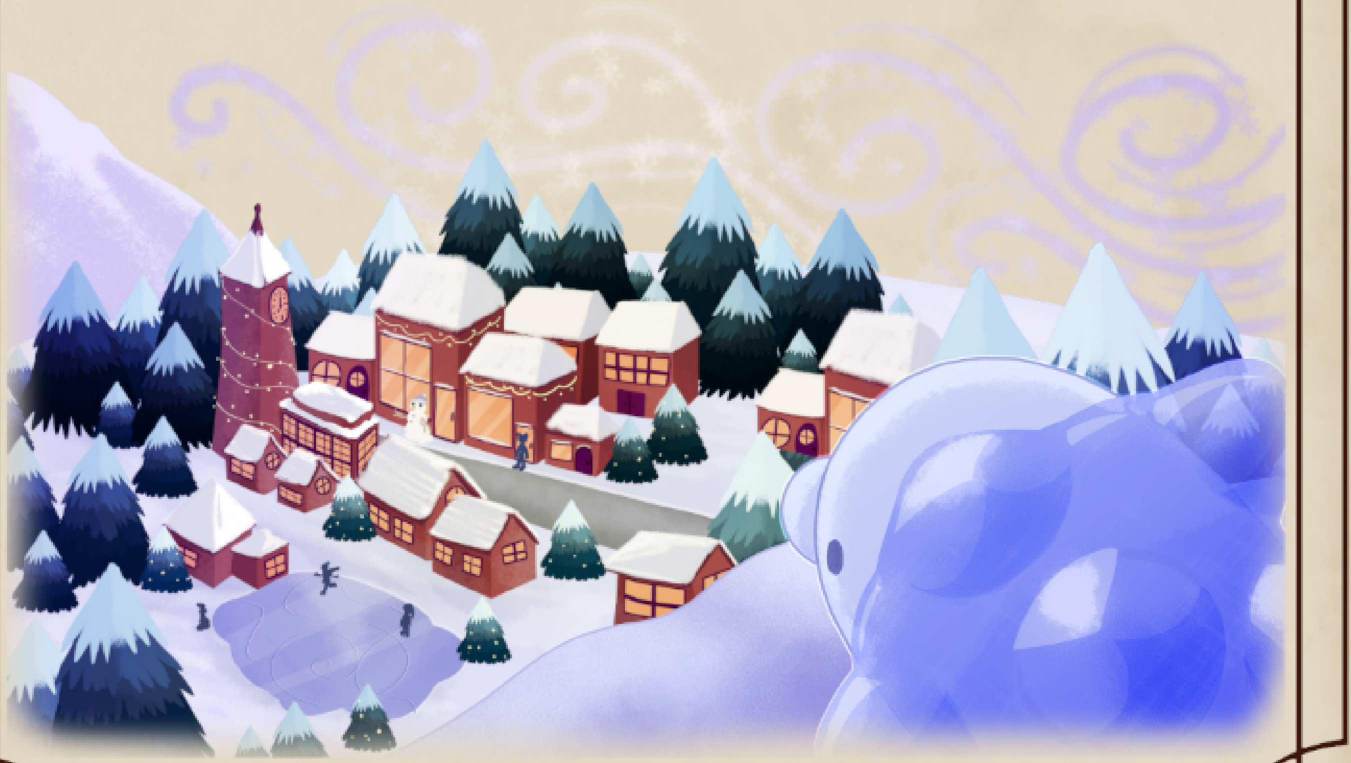
Author: SaimatsuShipper

ArtisticallyTwistedTea

A Never-Melt Heart

At the top of a cold, snowy mountain, a little Snom wandered alone through the dark winter night. It would stop here and there to scratch at the ground. A fierce storm had blown through just the other day and sealed away all of the delicious, recently-fallen snow beneath a layer of thick ice. Everywhere the little Snom looked, it was the same. With a sad sigh, it gave up its digging. No matter how hard it tried, it just wasn't strong enough to break through the ice. So it crawled away, searching far and wide for even a single snowflake to eat.

As it crested a hill, the Snom looked down at the nearby town full of humans that sat far below in the valley of two mountain peaks, and was dazzled by what it beheld. The sleepy settlement had undergone a magnificent transformation since last the little Snom had seen it. From its previous unassuming form, it had evolved into something magical. Under the veil of night, it now shimmered with a rainbow of festive lights as though stars had fallen from the sky to stud the streets and houses.



The little Snom's heart fluttered with hope. If there was one thing it knew, it was that light usually meant warmth, and that warmth would mean soft, melty tasty snow. Elated, it made its way down the slope to investigate as fast as its little legs could carry it.

Down in the town, the streets were positively bustling with humans and Pokémon alike. They strolled by in pairs or groups, carrying armfuls of bags and stacks of boxes in every shape and size imaginable. Smiles and laughter were all around, as were - the little Snom noticed gleefully - an abundance of seasonal treats. Children gripped bags of candy tightly in their fists as they toddled after their parents, couples took turns sharing bites of baked goods, and street vendors hawked freshly roasted nuts, yams, and fish skewers. Snow or not, the Snom was sure to find something delicious to eat here.

Crawling along down a busy sidewalk, the little Snom had to dodge and weave between heavy winter boots on its search for snacks. Even among the other wild Snom, it had always been the runt of the litter. And so it had to be wary not to be trod on in such a dense crowd of humans. It was hard going with a Snom's stubby legs, and it wasn't long before it had to scuttle over to the side and rest beneath a window sill.

"Row roww!" A terrifying roar sounded out.

Snom jumped in fright, its heart racing at the slavering panting of whatever beast had snuck up right behind it. Frozen in fear and still exhausted from the obstacle course that was the sidewalk, all it could do was turn on the spot, trembling, to face the threat.

"Aruu?" There sat a Greavard, staring at the Snom from behind the curtain of matted fur that covered its eyes. Its horrid, slimy tongue lolled out of its mouth as it panted, and the flame atop its head danced menacingly in the night air. A shiver ran down the little Snom's spine.

On the pavement in front of the Greavard sat a dog bowl holding a fruit cake bigger than the Snom's entire body. The cake's delectably moist crust shimmered in the swaying glow of string lights and the Greavard's candle. It was topped with a heaping helping of gooey, white frosting that smelled heavenly and sinfully sweet all at once; it reminded the Snom of its snow-capped mountain home.

The Snom's tummy growled even more fiercely at the sight of such a feast than the dog had at the intrusion. The Greavard tilted its head, and Snom began to shake all over for fear that it would take the gurgling of its hunger pangs as a challenge. Despite its terror, though, the little Snom just didn't have the strength to flee. It waited for the Greavard's attack, squeezing its eyes tightly shut. But no attack ever came. Instead of flashing its fangs and chomping down on the defenseless little bug, the Greavard nudged the bowlful of cake towards it. When the Snom merely stared up at it with pitiful, wet eyes, the ghost hound nudged the bowl again with its snout.

Confused but dreadfully hungry, the little Snom inched forward ever so cautiously towards the gleaming cake. To its surprise, the dessert was full of familiar fruits given new and fanciful forms: candied Oran and Sitrus peels, thinly sliced Chesto, dried and diced Aspear and Apicot, and glacé Cheris. The spicy aroma wafting from its crust was familiar too. The entire cake must have been liberally soaked in Figy juice and topped with Navill berry frosting. It was a cornucopia of wild nuts and fruits squeezed into one, glorious bundt.

Snom looked up at the Greavard, who merely sat and panted excitedly. Well, the little Snom figured, if it was at the ghost dog's mercy either way, it might as well go out with a full stomach. Leaning in, it took a hesitant nibble of the fruit cake. Immediately, all fear melted away into sweet, chewy deliciousness. The Snom chowed down in earnest, overcome by the harmony of flavors playing on its tongue. The Greavard happily dug in as well, each taking huge bites from either side until they had, between the two of them, polished it off completely.

The Snom burbled in contended bliss, its tummy finally quietted. The Greavard gave a big yawn and a stretch before settling down for a nap. It waved an ear with a dopey smile as the little Snom gave its thanks and bid farewell, waddling away with its belly full of cake so that its new friend could rest in peace.

Toddling along the lamp-lit streets of the town, the Snom found the going much easier with a full stomach. It wasn't as agile as had been before meeting the Greavard and its cake, but it seemed the crowds had died down just a little while it had been busy snacking. It had no problem meandering down the same sidewalk that had been as stressful as a slalom for it earlier in the evening.

As it looked around, taking in the lights and decorations hung from every storefront and lamppost, the little Snom spied a beguiling sign. Swinging over the door of a café surrounded by al fresco seating, it was a wooden board carved into the shape of a teacup filled to the brim with a fluffy, white topping that just *had* to be freshly shaved ice. The Snom drooled at the thought of washing down the fruit cake with a cold cup of glacial runoff.

"Ireeree, ireeree~." An airy, lilting chime sounded out.

Snom turned, ready to hustle through the café door past whoever had opened it in search of a refreshing beverage, only to realize that it wasn't the bell over the entrance at all. It was an Indeedee sitting at one of the smaller outdoor tables with her male counterpart. She motioned the Snom over with a tinkling giggle as her partner harrumphed and went back to enjoying his drink. Curious, the little Snom crawled over.

With her napkin, the Indeedee gently brushed crumbs of fruit cake from the corners of Snom's mouth.

"Ireeree~! Ree-ree?"

Snom stared, transfixed, at the cup in the male Indeedee's hands. The ceramic's tan glaze and the delicate handle perfectly matched the design of the wooden sign hanging above the shop's door. The male huffed, scowling at the intrusion. But when he looked into the little Snom's big, pleading eyes, he knew that even Arceus itself would not have been able to turn it away. Still obstinate, he lowered his cup for the Snom to sample his drink.

Taking a sip, the little Snom was treated to a panoply of flavours it had never even dreamed of. Soft, sweet whipped cream melted into milky chocolate that had a surprisingly bright, refreshing pop of peppermint in it. The taste and texture reminded the Snom of its favourite freshly fallen snow.

"Pweeeoo~!" the Snom chirped.

Even as the Snom was still marvelling over the wonder of this flavourful revelation, the female Indeedee offered her cup in turn. The Snom excitedly took a sip, wondering what new tastes it had to offer, only for its mouth to pucker instantly at the flash of bitterness. The drink had a similar chocolatey base to the first, but instead of sweetness cut with mint or Navill cream, it had the astringency of a cup of black coffee.

Desperate to wash the taste from its mouth, the little Snom licked despondently at a patch of ice between the bricks beneath the table. With another put-upon huff, the male Indeedee - its cheeks pink and lips pouting - offered the Snom its cup once again. The Snom gratefully took a second sip to rid itself of the mocha's lingering semi-sweet aftertaste. The female demurely covered her mouth with her hand to conceal her tittering, but her laughter wasn't the only amusement ringing out. At the larger, human-sized table next to them, both of the Indeedee's trainers had noticed the Pokémon's antics. They cooed and giggled as they snapped photos of the trio with their flip phones.

Giving a satisfied sigh, the Snom basked in the warmth of attention and cocoa. With its belly once again empty after walking all over town in search of more treats, it was time to head out yet again. While one of the drinks it had tried had been quite delicious, the Snom had definitively determined that the white foam atop the cups was not, in fact, snow. Saying farewell to the pair of Indeedee, Snom continued on its way.

All throughout the night, the poor, little Snom had been disappointed to see the town's well-swept walkways, and now that it was getting late, it was finding the lack of leftovers downright disheartening. Surely the lights and foot traffic would have softened it enough to eat, had it been left out. Instead, everything had been pushed off into lawns where it had piled up and been frozen over by the storm, just like everything up on the mountain.

Just as it tried to puzzle out why humans would do this, a tiny snowdrift at the head of an alleyway caught the Snom's eye. Perhaps not all was lost! It scuttled over to inspect the morsel's pristine surface for dirt. Once it was convinced that - while it was but a nibble - it was a perfect specimen, it opened its mouth wide to gulp it down in a single bite. Before it could snap up its prize, however, a mouse-like Pokémon even smaller than the Snom itself walked right up and stuck both of its sooty paws into the snow, scrubbing them clean with the now-ruined snack.

Snom deflated, resting its weary head on the pavement. The first snow it had found all night was now half-crushed, half-melted, and speckled grey with motes of ash. It couldn't be mad, though. The little mouse was too cute, and obviously just a child. It didn't know any better. The Snom moped as all hope of satisfying its rumbling tummy fluttered away like a snowflake falling in reverse.

Looking up with its beady, black eyes, the tiny mouse held out a now-clean paw and gently grabbed one of Snom's spines. Following along, confused yet aimless, the Snom allowed itself to be led a block over to where two more mice were standing in the halo of light beneath a street lamp. Larger than the first, they looked at Snom with blank, inscrutable expressions. One held a chunk of cheese, the other a thick cut of salami. Snom glanced up and saw that the store they were standing outside of was a deli, its windows displaying a host of charcuterie.

"Chip chip, chiree~."

The adult holding the cheese broke off a crumb and offered it to the Snom. Its partner followed suit, offering up a hunk of the salami. The little Snom happily took both samplings in its mouth and savoured them together. The cheese was briny yet sweet and melded perfectly with the smoky meat.

"Pwee!" the Snom cried joyfully. The creaminess of the cheese belied a pleasantly tangy aftertaste. Mixing with the earthy, gamey flavour of the salami, it was left with a lingering hint of anise in the afterglow of deliciousness.

Feeling a tap on its shell, it turned to see the smallest member of the Maushold, holding up a candied Pamtre berry. The Snom was touched. All night, it had been searching high and low for just a single bite of snow, and while it hadn't succeeded in its hunt, it had run into so many kind and generous Pokémon on its way. It had been introduced to flavours it had never known and invited to fill its empty belly without any expectation of payment in return.

Eyes glistening with tears of joy, the little Snom carefully leaned in and nibbled off half of the nutty, buttery, candied berry. The little mouse broke the other half into thirds and shared it with its parents. The four enjoyed their small, simple meal together in companionable silence, their mouths, bellies, and hearts all full. In the town square across the way, a band started up a jolly tune from where they had set up in a gazebo. Children sang along with their siblings, parents, and Pokémon; couples danced under the romantic glow of street lamps and string lights; and for the first time since it had wandered into town that cold and lonely night, the little Snom felt right at home.

The bell above the deli's door rang suddenly, startling the poor Snom something fierce. A stout man with a black, bushy mustache and brown skin stepped out into the cold to shake out his apron. The man looked down at the four Pokémon, and after a pause to process just what he was seeing, his eyebrows jumped up in surprise. The little Snom panicked; it was like a Fire Spin was closing in on it from all sides. Where had the Maushold gotten that food? They wouldn't have just randomly picked a deli to eat outside of if they'd brought it from elsewhere, and if they belonged to the mustachioed man, they would have been inside on such a cold night.

Just as suddenly as he'd appeared, the man turned and went back inside. Trembling, the Snom looked to the Maushold, hoping they had an escape route in mind. But the family of three simply stared at the door, their button-like eyes unblinking. It was so in its own head that the Snom jumped even higher when the bell above the door rang a second time. Reappearing, the man did not brandish a broom or bat at his uninvited guests, but knelt down and smiled kindly at them.

"Çam sakızı, çoban armağanı."

One by one, the man gave each of the Maushold members a colorful, little cube covered in white powder. For a moment, Snom was convinced that they were ice cubes carefully wrapped in a layer of frost. That was, until the man turned and set down a small, clear bag in front of the Snom. It contained a variety of the little cubes in as many colors as the lights strung up about the town and was tied closed with a blue and white ribbon.

The Snom reached out and felt the bag carefully with its mouth. Immediately, it knew they weren't ice cubes after all; the bag wasn't the least bit cold. But there was a lovely scent wafting from the contents that reminded the Snom of a Roselia's flowers. Snom marveled at the bag, sparkling in the warm glow of street lamps lining the avenue.

Giving the Snom a gentle pat on its shell, the man returned to his shop. Looking back to the Maushold, Snom watched as the adults each popped their treats - big as their heads - whole into their mouths. The trio bowed, then scuttled off down the nearby alley. Just before they disappeared out of sight, the youngling stopped, turned around, and waved to Snom, nearly dropping its dessert. Catching it before it hit the ground, it popped the cube into its mouth and hurried after its parents, its cheeks bulging.

As the little Snom sat and admired its gift, a light snow began to fall. If it kept up through the night, there would be a big breakfast waiting on the mountain in the morning. The Snom yawned. It was full, content, and oh so sleepy after so much excitement and adventure. It had been a wonderful night. Now, it was time to go home.

On its way out of town, the little Snom passed through the square where the band was still playing. It was easier to avoid the crowds here by crawling through the flower beds; even though they were barren, the humans still didn't seem to walk on them. Snom marched along to the rhythm of the music, chirping in time as it carefully balanced its gift between the spines on its back.

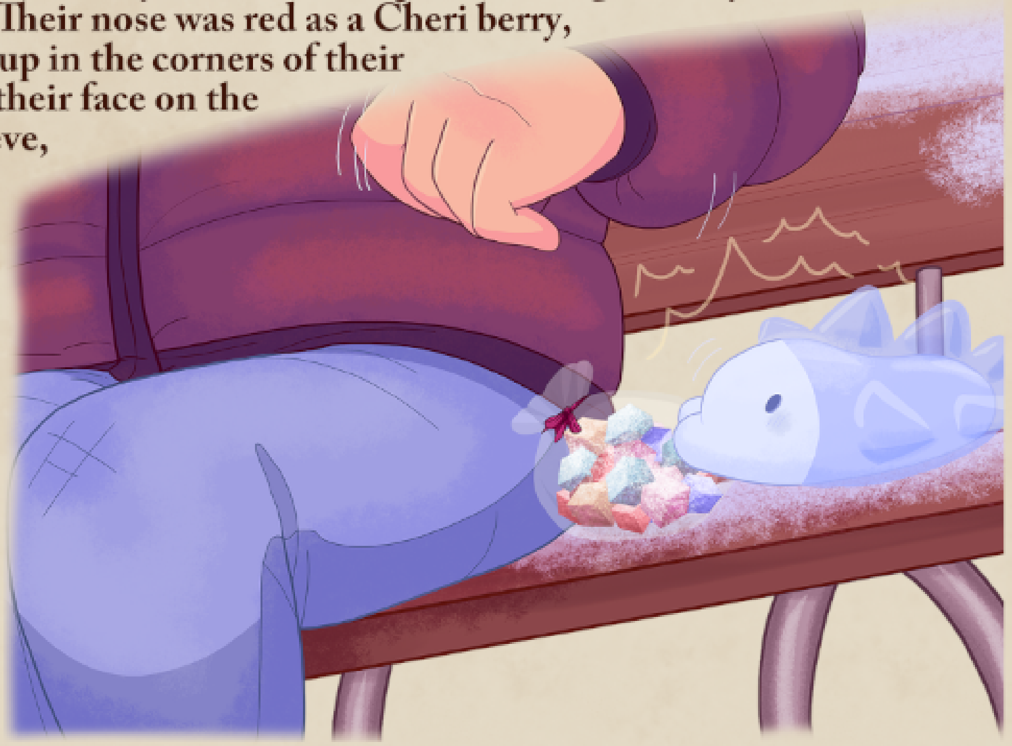
Peeking out from behind a clump of bare bushes, it checked to see if the coast was clear. If it made a break for the edge of town now, it could sneak away without any trouble. Crawling as fast as its little legs could carry it, the Snom left the cover of the flower bed and scuttled across the bricks for the park exit.

On a bench near the gate sat a human, about the same age as most of the couples strolling arm-in-arm up and down the roads lined with shops. Only, this one was alone. They watched the others dancing and playing in the square with a forlorn gaze that the little Snom knew all too well. It had often looked on as the larger Snom gobbled up the best bits of snow on the mountain with the same look. From time to time, it had even looked down on this very town the same way, wondering what it might be like to have an owner who would lovingly give it its own snow to munch on. Even as early as that very night,it had felt much the same before the glow of the town had sparked hope in its tiny heart, inviting it in.

It knew what it had to do. The little Snom swerved, turning away from its path to the gate and onto a direct course to the lonely human. Crawling over, it climbed the leg of the bench up onto the seat beside them. When they looked down and noticed the wild Snom, it slid the bag of candy off its head and nudged it towards them.

"Pweeoo, oowee!" it chirped.

At first, the human merely blinked in surprise, staring wide-eyed at the Snom and its offering. Their nose was red as a Cheri berry, and tears welled up in the corners of their eyes. Scrubbing their face on the back of their sleeve, they gave the Snom a bright, blushing smile. The Snom burbled happily as the human patted it on the shell.



Untying the ribbon from the bag, the human looked between it and the Snom, then reached out and gently tied it in a loose bow around the little grub's neck. Snom chirped, jiggling back and forth as the bow whimsically flopped and fluttered. With a laugh, the human reached into the bag and pulled out two of the cubes. They held one out to the Snom, which it excitedly snapped up. The flavour was heavenly. It tasted exactly as it smelled - floral, sweet, and light as a feather. The texture was a firm, chewy goodness that the Snom rolled over and over in its mandibles until its mouth was covered in the powdered sugar the cube had been dusted with.

or a long while, the two sat and enjoyed the sweets, neither in a hurry to finish and leave.

“Thanks for sharing your lokum, little guy,” the human said between bites of candy, giving the Snom a little scritch on the top of its head. It looked up at them with its mouth full of sticky, rose-flavoured delight. The two gazed into each others' eyes, and felt the spark of kindred spirits. “Do you have an owner? If you've got nowhere to go, how about coming home with me? It isn't big, but it gets kinda lonely all by myself.”

The little Snom chirped around its mouthful of lokum.

And so the pair sat, enjoying their snack as they listened to the jolly tunes of the band still playing as snow lightly dusted the ground around them. After they had finished the last of the sweets, the two got up, tossed the bag in a bin, and headed home together.

"Never-Melt Heart"

Author: milky.mosaic
Spot Artist: CassiferLynn

New Tradition

Can't she catch a *break?* This is an absolute disaster.

Elesa can't take it anymore. What an awful way to end such a hectic day. They've been working on this for hours and Elesa's exhausted.

She decided to make these demonic sugar cookies with her lovely fiancee, Skyla, to quell her disappointment of how the holidays have unfolded so far.

Sure, the kitchen smells absolutely divine. After all, how couldn't it with the aroma of sweet sugars and vanilla extract?

The lovely scent brings back a lot of her childhood memories. When she was young, her mother always baked a fresh batch of delicious sugar cookies with royal icing on them on the night of Christmas Eve.

She would always get a soft cookie with a cup of warm hot cocoa in a new pair of pajamas her father gave her. Elesa always curled up next to both of her parents under a thick wool blanket, watching the crackling fireplace as she waited for the Delibirds to arrive.

Yet…this has completely backfired. Instead of wonderful homemade cookies to enjoy with some creamy eggnog bundled up in a thick, faux fur coat huddled beside Skyla to close out the evening, she's spending the holidays with her head buried in her hands wondering what on earth went wrong with these treats.

She swears she followed her mother's recipe to a T, but these cookies are not fluffy and smooth like her mother had made them. As her mother did, the couple tried to do a Pikachu cut with Christmas hats out and dear Arceus, they spread out to be unrecognizable blobs. As a matter of fact, they're a conglomerate of wonky shapes that don't even look like any existing Pokémon. They are thin and crispy.

No, that implies they're still edible. They're *black* around the edges.

They both initially had a good laugh at their mishap as they cut the next batch of cookies while the first batch cooled. Skyla even booped some frosting on her nose which made Elesa giggle and brightened her mood for just a moment.

However, the disappointment quickly settles deep into the pits of Elesa's stomach when they both bite down on the cookies at the same time. The second the charred cookie hits her tongue, she frowns. It tastes nothing like her mother's recipe. That comfort she felt as a child every time she had one is gone.

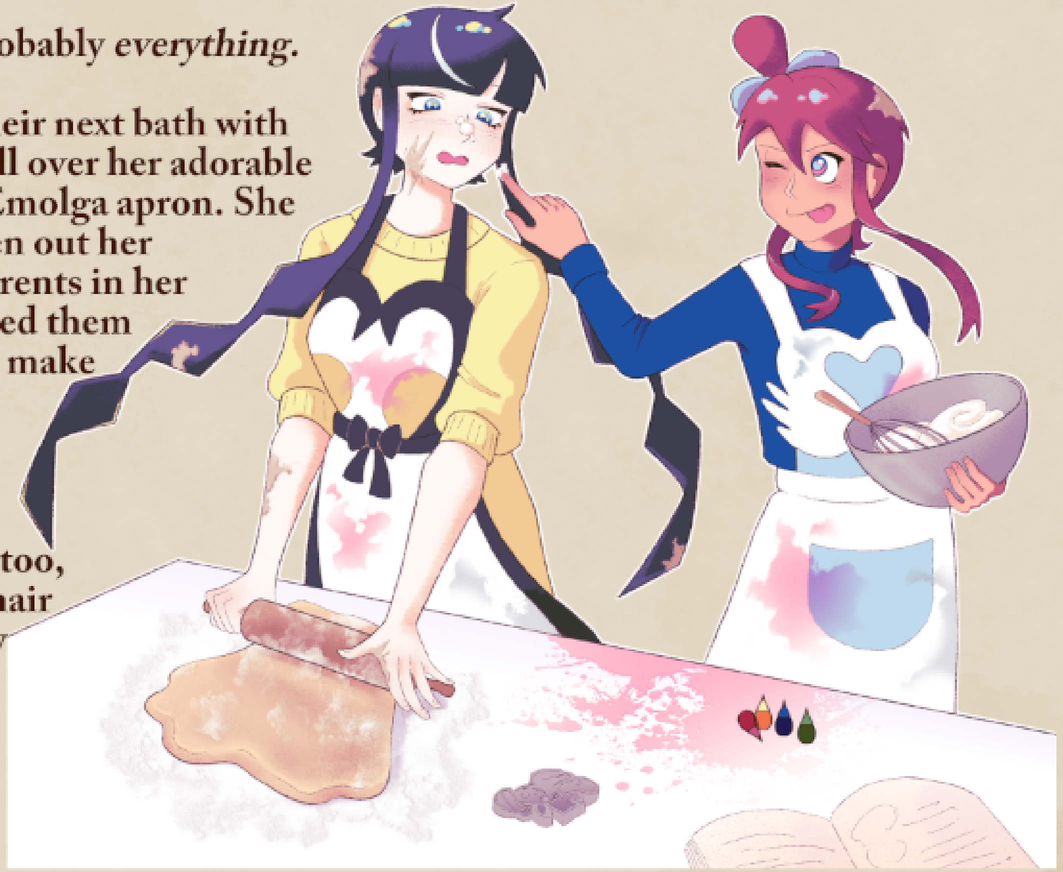
Skyla, being the darling optimist she is, actually likes the crunch of Pikachu's flattened tail, but…

Why are cookies so difficult to even bake? To be fair, perhaps if she had more skills than just wearing clothes for a living, she could have figured out a simple cookie recipe by now.

Elesa's still leaning on the counter, re-reading her mother's recipe to see what she's done wrong.

Honestly, probably *everything*.

They're on their next bath with flour caked all over her adorable homemade Emolga apron. She has long taken out her electrical currents in her hair and placed them to the side to make sure the ingredients didn't get everywhere. Good thing, too, because her hair has somehow been dusted with flour as well.



Skyla is having an *entirely* different experience. She's singing off-key to a Christmas song blared on the speakers. Her own Swanna apron is also a complete mess, dusted with powdered sugar and blobs of frosting that somehow got into her hair. Yet, she's still humming along with a bright smile as if she hasn't spent the last three hours on these treats.

Skyla dumps half a bottle of vanilla extract into the frosting. Elesa normally would have stopped her, but if helps beat that overwhelming butter flavor in those cookies…

Should they admit defeat?

There isn't much to do if they do. Their plans were long canceled since that terrible ice storm hit. The roads are in horrible condition. They aren't even letting people ride their Pokémon outside on the roads.

To be fair, if she had the power, she'd shut the roads down too. It's just too dangerous out there

When Elesa had come home with Skyla's gift in a little bag earlier this afternoon, she had slipped on the sidewalk. Thanks to how many heels she's had to break in over the years, she was able to catch herself before she got injured. Even so, it was a close one.

As she stepped in the door, the snow had begun to fall so rapidly, her vision had become white. It was in the nick of time too, because when Skyla had come home from her own errands, she mentioned she could barely see her hands.

She glances outside to see what it looks like now. As she predicted, the city's lights eerily glow against the clouds. Even so, the snow is coming down so peacefully as if that same weather hadn't caused so many accidents today. It really is a beautiful sight and it must be so peaceful outside, but those roads are probably horrific right about now.

Well, at least they're getting a white Christmas, but what Pokémon had someone crossed badly enough that it had brought Unova one of the worst snowstorms in years? It must have been a legendary.

Skyla looks outside with a frown, still stirring the frosting. "It looks like it's calming down, but I don't think they're calling me in."

"Oh? Not even as standby?"

"Nope. There's been more alerts of canceled flights due to weather conditions."

"Good thing you had the day off, then." Elesa notes with a frown. "They'd be ridiculous to bring you in."

"Yeah, I know. I'm really thankful to just stay home today, but I hope my coworkers are okay without me…" Skyla notes, staring out of the window with a blank stare. "That turbulence has to be awful."

"Well, they wouldn't be flying by this point, right?"

"That doesn't stop the planes that were already airborne." Skyla explains. "It was the right call to stop any more flights going out, but I can't imagine what tomorrow's going to be like."

"Well…" Elesa frowns. "I suppose we can play it by ear, but my guess is that we're snowed in for the entirety of the day. I don't think you're going to work. Are there any warnings yet that they blocked the roads here? Apparently, Opelucid City has already shut down theirs."

"Hmm…" Skyla grabs her phone, scrolling down with one finger. Her pout only deepens as she sighs. "Nope, not yet. But there are crashes everywhere. I'm gonna send a message to my folks to let them know it's too dangerous to come down. You wanna go down to yours?"

"No, my mom will understand. I'll just send her a quick message…" Elesa grabs her own phone and sends a swift text to her mother.

She glances over at Skyla, who sighs as she shakes her head. "Ugh, come on…"

"What is it?"

"Hang on, my mom's calling." Skyla rolls her eyes before answering the phone. Her voice trails off before she closes the door behind her. "Mama, I told you it's not personal…"

Elesa frowns, glancing down at her phone. Her mother sends a smile and a thumbs up. Elesa knows an emoji without words means that she's furious.

At least *she* didn't call…

Elesa needs a drink to get her mind off of things. She rummages through her fridge, trying to find something to consume. It doesn't even need alcohol.

Her lips are parched and anything would feel good on her throat right about now. She finds a carton of Blissey eggnog and grips it with her left hand. Before she's about to close the fridge, her eyes catch a small little box with a green bow on it that wasn't there this morning.

She tilts her head before taking the treat out, placing it on the counter. She'll investigate it after she gets the drinks set up. She grabs two glasses and pours the sweet drink in each glass. Though she doesn't have any rum to add into the mix right now, the virgin version of it will be fine. She pours enough for her partner as well — Skyla adores the stuff and would probably appreciate something to enjoy after that call. She's still got a slightly raised muffled voice behind the door, probably still arguing with her mother.

She's going to be a minute…

Elesa's eyes wander to that unfamiliar little box again. Her temptation gets the best of her and she unwraps the bow, opening the little box to something she's never seen before.

In the middle of the box is a little chocolate treat shaped like a Pineco. The Pineco is layered with forest green chocolate wafers with candy eyes, and of course, topped with a holiday hat. Though it's something Elesa usually wouldn't eat, this does look pretty yummy.

In spite of still being coated in sugar from the cookie dough, her tongue tingles for the sweet, creamy taste of chocolate.

The door opens before Skyla exhales. "Ugh, finally. Sorry about that. My mom just would not get it."

"Oh, it's okay. Does she get it now?"

"More or less." Skyla sighs before shrugging. "I'm sure she'll forgive me eventually."

"She will." Elesa assures her as she hands her fiance her drink. "Uhm, I made some eggnog for us."

"Oh, thank Arceus!" Skyla leans down to gulp down her drink. Her eyes wander to the box as her eyes widen. She places her cup down with another sigh. "Oh shoot, I was hoping you wouldn't find that."

"Sorry." Elesa glances away. "It just caught my eye."

"It's totally fine. I just wanted to give it to you after we were done with the cookies."

"W-what is it?"

"Oh, it's a popular treat in Opelucid City. They're Pineco chocolates." Skyla explains. "I thought you'd like to try it."

"Well, you were right. My mouth's already watering."

"Well, that's good! I got the mint one just for you."

Elesa's always had a soft spot for mint. Skyla places it on a plate before glancing at the disaster on the counter. Cookies and frosting have all but buried the marble, a whirlwind of sugar piling up in their kitchen.

"Honestly, I don't know if we can save these cookies." Skyla frowns. "It is a good thing I did get those chocolates or we'd have nothing for tonight..."

Elesa shrugs. "It wouldn't have been the end of the world."

"True. Ready to get back to the oven? We still have some dough to try again."

"No." Elesa mumbles with a frown. "Unless you wanna keep going?"

"Nah, I'm good. I could use a chill night after that phone call." Skyla admits as she shakes her head. "Besides, that frosting tasted awful. I don't think any amount of flavor can save it."

Elesa leans over, taking a quick fingertip of frosting before licking it. The vanilla extract punches her straight in the face. That's even *worse* than the butter! Her face twists in disgust as she shakes her head. "No, you're right. That's disgusting."

"I'm not surprised."

"Don't feel bad. Even if the frosting was amazing, I don't think we could have saved those cookies anyway. Ready to clean up?"

Skyla agrees before turning the music back on. She hums along as she begins to do dishes. Elesa tosses the poor globs of sugar cookies into the trash before she notices how dirty the counters are. She grabs a rag, scrubbing off the ingredients. Normally, she wouldn't be too enthusiastic to clean up her kitchen, but the music does make it a much more pleasant experience.

For the first time all night, it's *peaceful.*

After they're done with clearing up the mess, they make their way to the couch. Skyla flops on it with a hum. "Well, what do you wanna do for the rest of the night?"

"I don't have any ideas. What about you?"

"Hmmm…" Skyla nods before her eyes light up again. "Oh! We can put on a movie I loved as a kid. I'm warning you now though. It's probably corny and bad."

"I could go with something corny and bad." Elesa gets back up to grab their eggnog and Pineco chocolate, placing it between them. Skyla puts on the show and the familiar tune of holiday cheer echoes their living room as the movie begins.

The movie is a bit of a drag, but it does have some adorable moments. Elesa thought the scene with the cute Pikachus dancing around the tree the Mimikyu decorated was sweet. The two watch in silence, slowly snacking on their eggnog and Pineco chocolate. Good thing they discarded the cookies because both of these are far better than their baking disaster.

Instead of the general cheap chocolate she's used to having at her parents place, it's a dark cocoa with a strong, lingering peppermint aftertaste. She settles her tongue, letting the chocolate melt, savoring every second of it. This is *lovely.*

"Ugh," Skyla speaks up midway through the movie with a frown before turning it off. "I definitely outgrew that one. Sorry, I can't take anymore."

"It's okay," Elesa gives a weak smile before leaning her head on Skyla's shoulder and moving to embrace her in a side hug. "To be fair, I think it could have been a lot worse. We could have burnt down our kitchen."

"Maybe we can make that our goal next year."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"I was kidding!" Skyla laughs. "Though the weather's still awful out there. We can find something else to do. But first, I want to finish that treat."

"Mmmhmm," Elesa glances at the half eaten Pineco chocolate. "That is *really* good."

"Oh it's honestly not my thing. I didn't realize I grabbed dark chocolate. Though it's a good thing we picked up that Blissey Eggnog. That hit the spot."

"I just needed a drink after all of that." Elesa chuckles. "We can make some hot cocoa in the morning. Sweet enough cocoa for you and we can have a sweet drink with our breakfast. Sound good?"

"I like that idea. Actually…"

"What is it?"

"I was gonna give you my gift tonight since we were gonna spend the day with our families and all. You wanna do that tonight instead?"

"Oh, yes!" Elesa agrees before standing up and grabbing the gift bag she had gone through the trouble of getting this morning. She sits back down with her bag. Skyla must have gotten up and grabbed her own before Elesa noticed.

"Here!" Skyla all but throws her bag towards Elesa's face. "Start with mine!"

"Okay, okay!" Elesa catches it with a giggle before placing it in her lap.

She already knows what it is before she's able to take off the tissue paper. It's a beautiful little pendant shaped like an Emolga. As soon as she posed with it, it was in high demand in stores all season. She wanted to keep the one she posed with, but couldn't bring herself to ask. Every time she passed a stall to grab something, someone was asking if it was in stock and the poor merchant had to explain it was already sold out.

She smiles. “Wow, how did you know I wanted this?”

Skyla beams. “Well, I really liked the shoot in it and kinda guessed since I couldn’t think of anything else. I spent hours looking for that pendant, but they were sold out everywhere. I literally snagged the last one that was in stock this afternoon.”

“So that’s where you were!”

“Uh huh, and you were out getting my own gift?” Skyla teases.

“Uh, yeah.” Elesa looks away with a light blush. “Sorry, I was really busy! Here, I hope you like it.”

“I’m sure I will!” Skyla nods as she opens her gift to see a giant Togekiss plush. Her eyes sparkle as she hugs it close. “I do!! This is adorable. I’m gonna snuggle it all night.”

“But not me?” Elesa teases with a playful pout.

“Well, I have two arms!” Skyla places the plushie to the side, embracing her fiance with a quick peck on the cheek, wrapping her arms around Elesa’s shoulders. “Y’know what? Today’s not so bad. I got a cute plush and got to spend some time with you.”

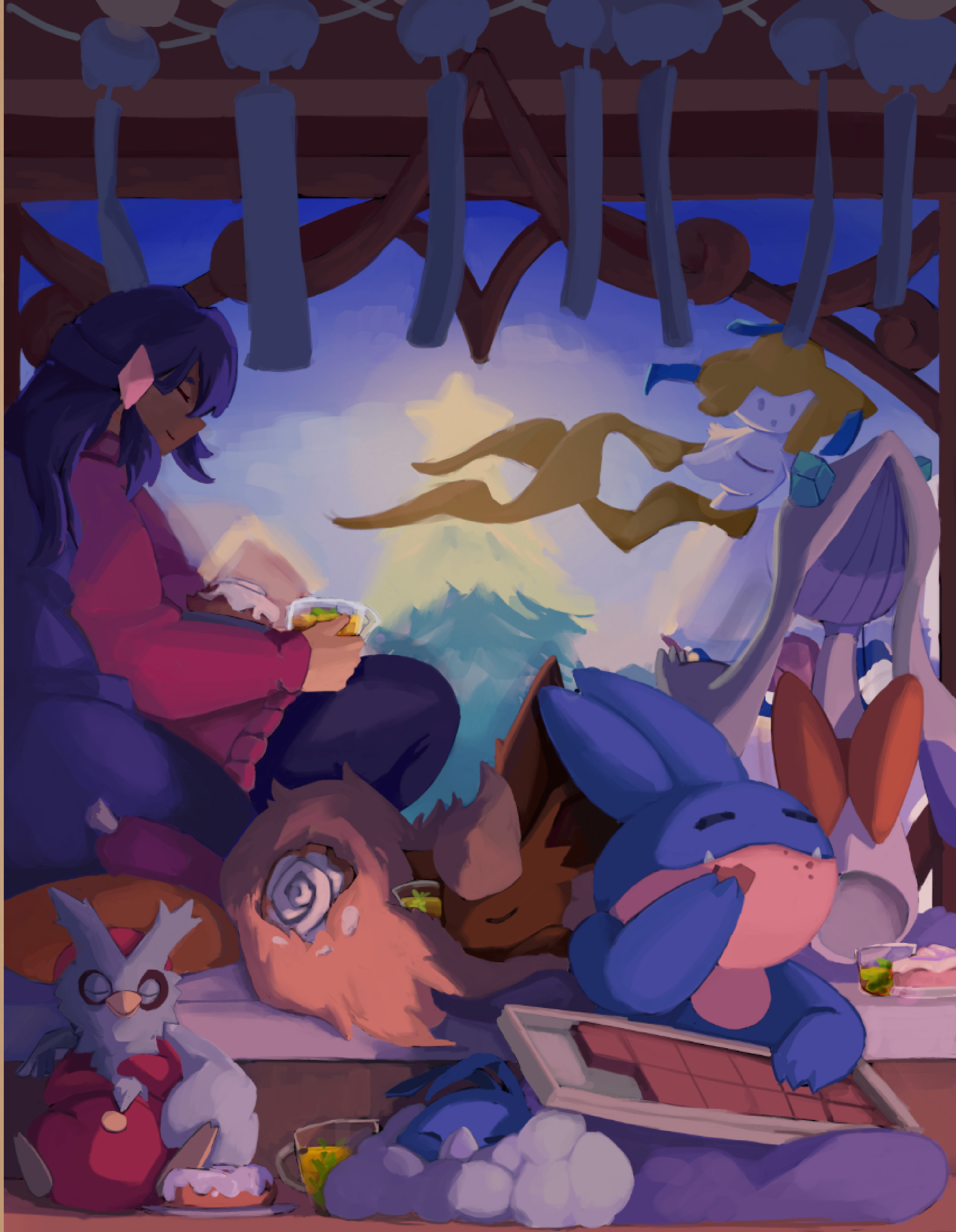
Elesa nods enthusiastically. Her mood has drastically improved since this afternoon. Just spending time with Skyla and actually looking forward to tomorrow instead of dreading all the family drama that comes with the holidays makes it completely worth it.

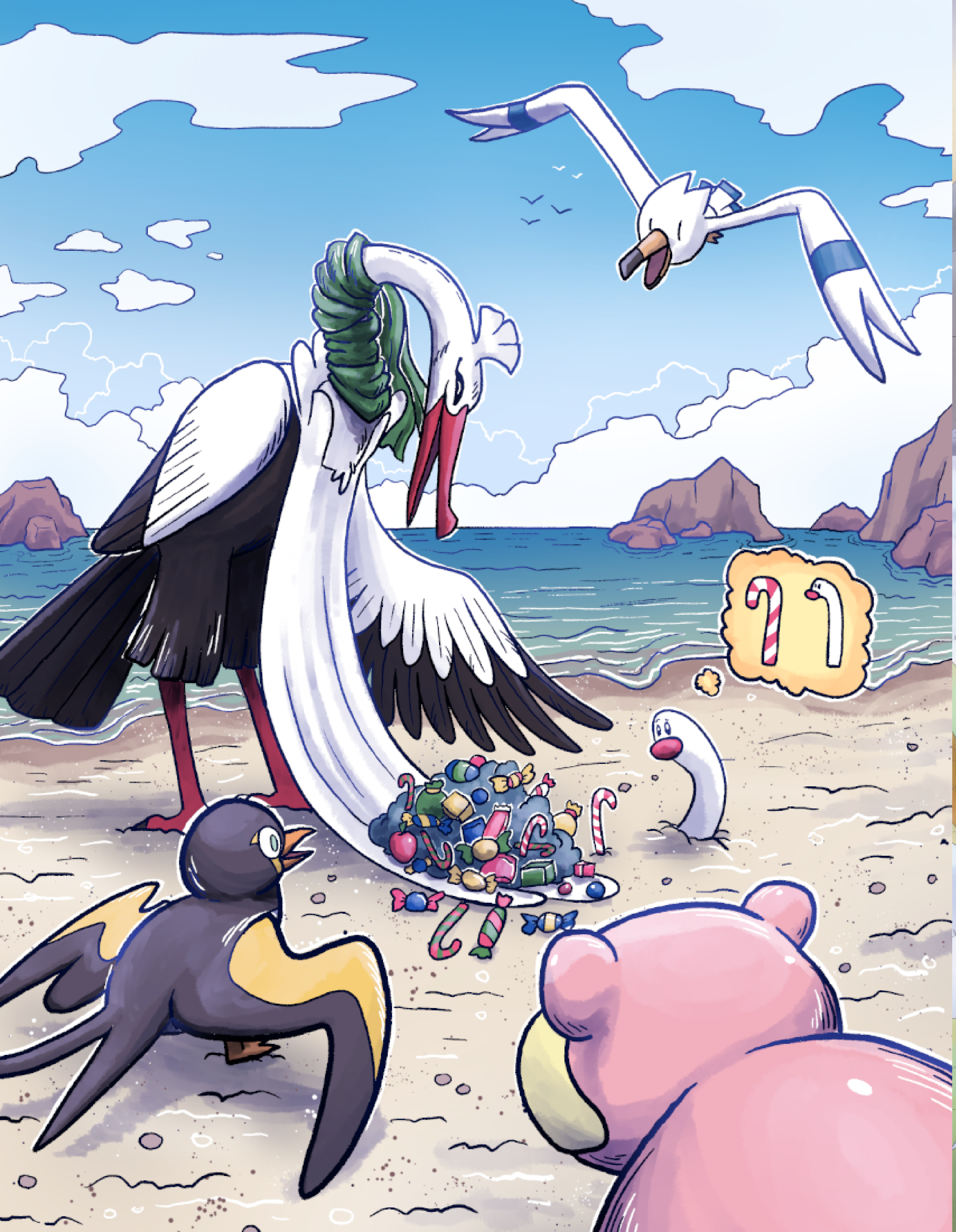
Skyla squeezes her plushie close as Elesa reaches for the blanket next to them and they turn the movie back on just for some background noise, the two staring at nothing in particular and not saying a word, enjoying the peaceful evening.

It’s a new tradition Elesa can get behind.

"New Tradition

Author: Ellory
Spot Artist:Scaredyrat





Permafrost Heart

Heart in permafrost, Grusha chases the vestiges of the auroras.

The auroras scatter verdant lights across the night, like a forest of pines climbing into the sky. Night abounds in a harmony of greens, but blue rises above the earth—and rises *beyond.*

Even the snow-capped peaks of Glaseado Mountain cannot reach the heights of the auroras. Beautiful, far, and yet melancholic all the same. A distance he cannot reach, a dream he cannot chase, where does his heart go when the sky feels so endless, so grand, that it makes him feel so finite and cold?

When the snow dusts his fingers still, Grusha closes his eyes and lets the winter cover his shoulders in wings of white. He leans his forearms on the top of a bench a short distance from his gym. As the moon peeks between the clouds and over his shoulder, Grusha watches the rhythm of snowfall lull him into quiet contemplation. Under the gentle glow, the silver gourd in the sky pours snow across his skin. But under the lunar goddess, her snow flutters like night blossoms across his heart.

Only when the world grows silent does the moon vanish.

Grusha then remembers one balm that can ease this melancholy.

Within an old journal nestles a recipe card that can restore his heart—his grandmother's loving bowl of egg drop soup.

Deep within the arctic heart, Grusha gazes at the auroras above in breathless wonder. His fingers stretch high above his face, and into the infinite expanse of space. To see the spectacular lights peek between his fingers, his childish adoration encourages him to reach higher into the sky. But when he blinks, his mind returns to the present, and the beauty of the umbral sky vanishes from his grasp.

"That was the night before one of the largest boardercross competitions in history," Grusha explains, cradling the phone between his shoulder and ear as he rummages through an old journal.

Like clockwork, dawn floats through the sterile, white blinds, and the dim light weeps on the bandages covering Grusha's hands. The sun no longer feels warm on his body. Its tepid touch leaves his heart cooler, and his gaze more vacant.

"And when I rose from my hospital bed, I knew the sun on my career had already set."

In the winter, he sheds his hospital gown and replaces it with a new coat. Snowfall weeps outside the gym building. He knows more than anyone that the snow feels colder because he knows what warmth is.

But it's odd. The reason why he retells his tale to Eira, the new champion of Paldea, is because he recognizes that same dull flame in her eyes. It's a faint, flickering light—one that mirrors his own thoughts about what passion really means to an individual before that light dims after a fateful collision. The gloomy shadow across his heart now covers his eyes and he surrenders. Complacent, but not particularly unhappy.

"La Primera then scouted me to be a Gym Leader and the rest is history. Oh. Don't apologize. The past is the past—I'm only telling you because you seemed curious. It's OK. Really. Now—*oh.* I think I found that recipe I told you about earlier."

Grusha thumbs through the pages and pulls out a sepia-colored recipe card.

"The egg drop soup one?" Despite the tiny quality of her voice, a quiet warmth flows from her words and through the phone. "I actually love that soup. Although, nothing can really compare to the way *my* family makes it, hehe."

"Oh, is that so?" Grusha smiles. As he glances at the calendar, he realizes that the holidays approach with quiet splendor. Wreaths of gold and silver bells decorate the Pokémon center as of late, and he knows the festivities will ascend to the mountains.

“Actually, do you have any holiday plans?”

“I don’t.” Grusha’s eyes follow the curves of the ink on the recipe card.

“Hmm…Grusha, why don’t we have a small party and celebrate it together? We could try making your family’s egg soup recipe! I would love to see how your family makes it.”

“Sure. I like the sound of that. Let’s meet up at my Gym then.”

Thirty minutes after the call ends, Grusha furrows his brow. His eyes can only decipher part of the ingredients, but the remainder of the recipe card stares back at him in a waterlogged state.

Well. A raincheck on this celebration would really be uncool of me. But…maybe we could…improvise a bit.

A young woman with long black hair tied into twin, low hanging ponytails stands before him in a thick, cerulean coat. Despite her shivering frame, her blue eyes are steady, and she curiously examines the journal in his hands. Grusha invites her inside.

“You went grocery shopping?” Grusha eyes the bags in her arms, reaching out to hold them. He holds the journal under his arm and takes two bags from her. “You didn’t have to. I have some ingredients in the fridge, and I was going to—”

“Don’t worry about it. I wanted to make sure you’re stocked up on food while I’m here. I know it’s a bit of a journey traveling down the mountain, so this makes us even.”

“Even? For what?”

Eira shakes off the snow, removes her boots, and steps inside the warm Gym Building. Grusha’s Pokémon takes her scarf and coat, hanging it by the entrance.

“Nothing, nothing,” she hums, already walking to the back of the gym, and inside the general kitchen area. “Let’s get started with that recipe, shall we?”

Grusha follows her with groceries in tow. Her silhouette disappears around the corner, and when she’s out of earshot, he shakes his head and exhales a soft sigh. A smile crescents across his lips, and he acquiesces to her whims.

He glances down into the plastic bags, noticing jars of the culinary variety. Chicken bouillon powder, rock sugar, tapioca starch, and a pepper shaker among other things. The other grocery bag contains two cartons of eggs, and he handles that bag with a sobering graveness.

As Grusha enters the kitchen, he helps Eira unload the ingredients onto the counter and stores perishables in the fridge. Finally, they stand near the sink, ready to cook.

“Admittingly, I can’t seem to read the recipe card,” Grusha explains, as Eira lathers her hand with soap.

“That’s fine! I’ll use my family’s recipe as the base. If you recall anything familiar about your family’s soup—be it flavors, texture, or smell—mention it and we can adjust accordingly.”

“Yes, I’ll make sure to do that. I think it’ll be fun recreating the recipe. Thank you, Eira.”

“Heh. No need to act so formal, Grusha.” Eira washes her hand under the facet. “Hmm. Actually, what kind of stove do you have?”

“A gas stove.”

Under the sink cabinet, Grusha reaches for a large blue pot. He vaguely recalls filling the blue pot under halfway with water. After filling the pot, he sets it on the stove. Grusha turns the knob and adjusts the flame to medium-low heat.

“You use chicken broth as the soup base, right?” Eira asks.

Grusha nods. Eira opens the sealed carton of chicken broth and pours half of it into the pot. Grusha goes to the sink and washes his hands.

Behind him, he hears Eira grab a teaspoon. “Now we need to measure out three quarters of a teaspoon of chicken bouillon powder and add it to the soup. Added. Next, we need half a spoon of salt…and done.”

"Oh. Don't forget to add some half a tablespoon of rock sugar," Grusha recalls.

After drying his hands, he plucks another spoon and scoops out the exact amount of rock sugar. He deposits it into the soup. Then, he pulls out a ladle and stirs the broth.

"The soup smells good." Eira smiles, standing beside him and peers into the bronze soup.

"It does, doesn't it?" Grusha raises the heat and continues to stir until all the ingredients dissolve and become one delicious soup. "It should start boiling soon."

Suddenly, his eyes flicker to something on the counter. "What's this?"

He picks up a glass container and underneath his thumb reveals a label in elegant writing.

"It's tapioca starch," Eira says. "It helps thicken the soup. While you can actually use cornstarch, my family prefers to use tapioca starch instead. It's actually my own rations. I didn't find any when I shopped in town.

"But yeah! We need to get three teaspoons of tapioca starch into a small bowl. Then add a bit of water to cover it and stir the starch together until the starch doesn't clump at the bottom of the bowl."

"Gotcha. That makes sense. Now…let's actually not forget the eggs. We need about—"

"Sixteen eggs!" Eira smiles at him, and he chuckles.

"Our recipe is really similar. It's such an odd coincidence."

"Who knows. Maybe our family were friends, but we never knew?"

Eira opens the fridge and pulls out the cartons. Grusha fetches a large bowl to hold the eggs. As they wait for the soup to boil, they count out sixteen eggs to use.

"You know, I never told you about my past, have I?" Eira cracks the first egg.

"You haven't. But I would like to learn more about you." Grusha cracks the second egg.

"When I was young, I used to live in the Sinnoh region with my mom." She tosses the eggshells into a nearby bin. "I was painfully shy and had low self-esteem issues. But whenever I watched my mom perform as a coordinator, I admired her strength, beauty, and resolve. I wanted to be more like her. That's when my mom noticed how much I loved watching Pokémon contests and encouraged me to become a coordinator. I started practicing with my Snorunt, and had my mom coach me to be a coordinator. Eventually, I started participating in official contests. Then, when I gained enough experience, I started advancing.

"At fourteen, I debuted as a coordinator through a special program. It was just by chance that they televised my match, and it blew up overnight. It was scary at first, but I started to find my stride and confidence."

Grusha glances at her, noticing the tenderness of her expression and tone.

"I had sponsorships, deals, and became a role model for other young girls. I felt very fortunate to do what I loved. But, despite how well everything was going for me, my mom started growing ill. When I had time off, I would accompany her to doctor visits to see what was wrong. It wasn't until a while later that the doctors diagnosed her with a terminal illness."

Eira hesitates. Fourteen eggs sit in the bowl now.

"At seventeen, I was scheduled to compete on one of the largest stages in the Sinnoh region. It was also a very heavily televised match, and all eyes were on me. The pressure I felt that day was immense. But on that same day, my mom was in the hospital. Just minutes before I stepped on stage, I received a call from the hospital that my mom passed on. I was beyond devastated."

Eira adds the sixteenth egg to the bowl.

"Two minutes after the contest began, I withdrew from it. Then…I finally stepped away from the coordinating world and limelight altogether."

Grusha stares at her, seeing her expression change to a gentle melancholy. He swallows once, trying to find the words to comfort her. But the weight of her story, ambition, and resolve makes him falter.

He knows her feelings. He *understands* her feelings. From climbing onto a grand stage in one moment and plummeting down in the next instance. That labor of love shatters when your confidence, mental fortitude, and physical health collapses.

"Eira. I'm…I'm so sorry."

Eira looks up, but she doesn't look *at* him. She offers a vague smile that makes his own heart lurch.

"It's OK, Grusha. It's all in the past. If anything, I want you to know that you're not alone either."

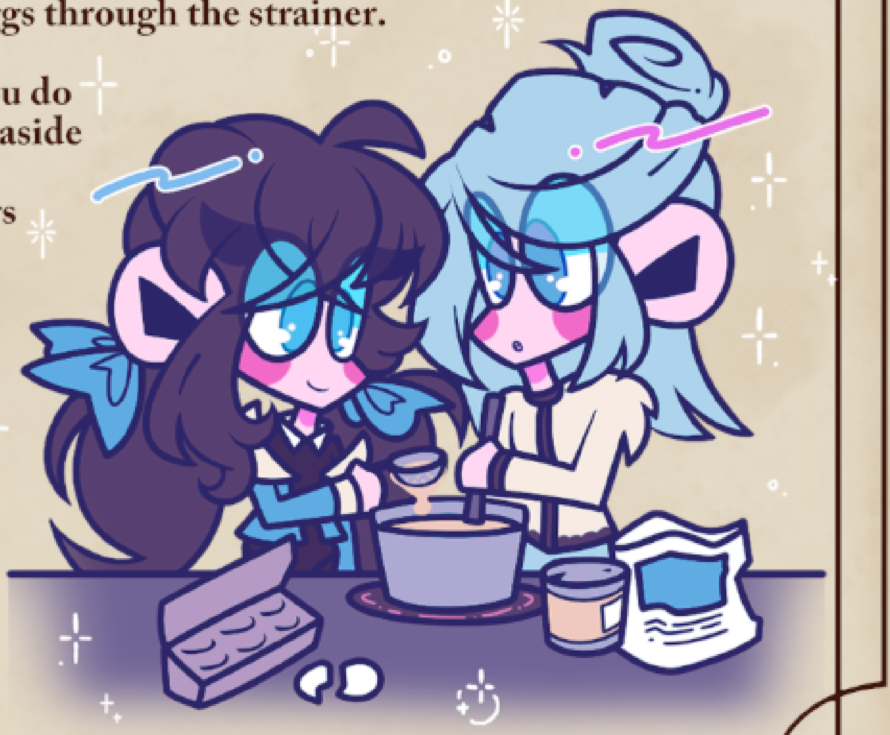
Before Grusha could process her words, Eira checks the soup. Her countenance changes and the somber ache in her voice vanishes. "Oh. The soup's boiling. Onto the next step!"

Grusha gawks at her.

As Eira pours the tapioca and water mix into the boiling broth, and the bubbling recedes. "OK, now we need to get the strainer and pour the eggs through it and into the soup."

She reaches for the strainer and holds it above the steam and pot. With her free hand, Eira pours the eggs through the strainer.

"Here. Um, I'll stir while you do that." Grusha says, putting aside his thoughts and taking the long wooden spoon. He stirs the soup in steady, slow circles as she pours the eggs through the strainer. Carefully, Grusha stirs but winces when the steam hungrily licks at his hands.



As the two work together, Grusha marvels at how the egg yolk flutters like ribbons of gold and white into the hot chicken broth. However, his mind returns to Eira's story. He wants to return to the conversation from earlier, but struggles to segue into it again. *Maybe the moment has already passed,* Grusha thinks, as he continues stirring. *But I want to say something.*

Eira scrapes the rest of the egg yolk into the pot, and Grusha moves the wooden spoon in steady circles. After the soup boils again, Eira tastes the soup and hums in approval. Grusha turns off the heat and grabs mittens to move the pot on an adjacent stove burner.

They open the cupboards and retrieve bowls and spoons.

"Here, Grusha. Have a taste." Eira ladles him a bowl.

Grusha smiles and receives it. He shakes a bit of pepper into the soup and stirs it with a spoon. Finally, he gently blows on the spoon and takes a sip.

The warmth he drinks suddenly unlocks something inside his heart. He eagerly gulps down another spoonful and then another—then he looks at Eira, his eyes shining with child-like wonder and adoration.

"How is it possible? This *soup*…if I could describe the flavor, it reminds me of home." Grusha finishes the rest of the bowl, reaching for seconds until he feels a ribbon of warmth spreading across his chest. The warmth lingers on his face, and his heart exudes a light fluttery feeling as if he's glowing.

"I should actually be thanking *you,* Grusha. When you told me about your past…I think we're more alike than you think. Except…"

"Except what?"

When they finish their meal, Grusha reaches out and gathers their empty bowls. But Eira jumps to her feet to help. He smiles and her reticence vanishes when she grins at him. When they go to the kitchen, they warily eye the blue pot soaking in the sink, along with the small pile of dishes and spoons from earlier when measuring out ingredients. They glance at each other.

"If we wash this now, we can watch a movie afterwards. Sounds like a deal?"

"Deal. Plus, it's faster when there's two of us," Grusha agrees.

Eira soaps the sponge and begins scrubbing at the bowls. One by one, she hands them to Grusha to rinse. As he rinses the bowls with water, the gentle clinking of ceramics and cups remind him of his family. The creases around the corners of his grandparents' mouth is proof of the love behind their smile. And he remembers that their well worn hands know how to carry hardship and tenderness in one grasp. With those same hands, his grandparents imbue food with a special ingredient called love to him.

Aside from love—from familial, platonic, or romantic—what else makes a kitchen warm?

A sense of belonging, togetherness, and community.

And being here with Eira—washing dishes, sampling foods, cleaning messes—the shared domesticity stirs a fond memory of his family. And with family comes memories of food. The memory of that warm soup predates his professional career, and even after his accident, what keeps Grusha's feet to the ground is the intent behind the soup.

He thinks of his grandparents again. The love and sincerity and gentleness behind the act of cooking—maybe he's forgetting what it means to be *part of something.*

Maybe that's why sharing a warm meal with the people you cherish makes you feel like you belong. And that sense of community, of togetherness and love, is what makes your heart feel so full and enough.

"Whether things happen for a reason, I don't want to spend the rest of my life being unhappy."

It seems as if Eira could sense his thoughts.

"If I can move forward, even if it's just one step at a time, surely the future will grow softer every time we smile." Eira says quietly, handing him more spoons to wash. "So let's always leave space for light and hope. Let's always move forward after we grieve. And when we're strong enough, maybe we can look at the past and remember that we stand taller than the shadows that follow us."

Grusha pauses and glances at Eira. She puts the sponge away and this time, actually looks up at him. Her blue eyes shimmer, with more life and light than their first encounter on the snowy summit of his gym.

"And we're friends, aren't we? I'll help you up when you fall, and I know you'll do the same. Together, we'll always outlive the bad days, and we'll celebrate because being alive and being present in this moment is worth it. Don't you agree, Grusha?"

And for some reason, his eyes mist up, and his permafrost heart melts, little by little. To make peace with his past and his career, how wonderful is it then, to share this lifetime with so many incredible people?

If a single heartbeat holds so much strength, then the thundering he hears in his ears must be the sound of his heart crying out. But they are not tears of sorrow but of joy. And maybe he understands what it means to not be alone anymore.

The ice gym leader holds a certain fondness for winter. With the glacial calving of ice into the subarctic waters, the auroras above bridge the distance between the constellations. The depth of winter, of soft static silence and of snow upon the ground, each breath of silence halts all signs of life and sound.

But here, on the grand precipice between land and sky, on the snow dusted peaks of Glaseado Mountain, the winter guardian breathes its auroral colors into Grusha's heart once more.

"Permafrost Heart"

Author: Keikaru
Spot Art: Cirrus

Weather Forecast:
Salt, Pepper, and Snowflakes

Absently, Hilbert rubbed his nose as he stepped out of the Mistralton Airport.

Already, the crisp and frigid air of Unova in winter nipped at his nose, numbing it soundly. Yet, Hilbert hardly cared about that—and the inevitable stuffy nose he would get in due time—as he grinned broadly at finally having landed back home.

The flight from Kanto to Unova was almost unbearably long and his seat partner to the left of him had fallen asleep on his shoulder—rudely not even asking first before deciding that Hilbert would make the perfect pillow. His legs had ached with the need to stretch out in front of him, but Hilbert very much did not have leg-room-money and so settled with the knowledge that once he got off the plane he could stretch and crack his back oh so satisfyingly. That reminder, which had kept him sane for all seven hours, nearly caused him to clap over-enthusiastically once the flight had successfully landed.

However, while Hilbert was Unovan, he wasn't *that* much entrenched in the stereotypes of his region. At least, not that one in particular. Ok, admittedly he often clapped at the end of a movie—But that was only because he was supporting the acting career of his younger cousin, Nate! Surely, pointing at the screen and turning to the person beside him, whether they be a stranger or friend, and going, 'I know him!' was understandable in such circumstances.

Regardless. Hilbert was glad that he was finally back region-side, and with such fortunate timing too, as he arrived early enough to surprise his mother with his homecoming on the day of the Winter Solstice.

It was the perfect time of year to return home, as all over the region towns and cities alike put their best foot forward and decorated for the season of giving. Neatly wrapped presents in bright red ribbons were a popular, and easy, choice but Hilbert also appreciated the minimalist lighting set-ups that store fronts and shopping districts displayed at night. He couldn't wait to take a day and visit the tree in Castelia City that went up every year without fail—Hilbert was even debating gathering all of his friends for a day of ice skating at the rink and buying overpriced hot cocoa and soft pretzels.

For now however, he focused on his main goal and accepted that his desire to dash to his next destination was the Unstoppable Force to the traffic at the Mistralton Airport-in-holiday-mode's Immovable Object. In any other circumstance, Hilbert would have called ahead and let his mother know that he was coming home for the holidays, thereby negating the need for a yellow taxi to ferry him away from the arrivals zone. But he was a man on a mission, with a very firm destination in mind:

The nearest deli. *Stat.*

To which he had an order placed in advance waiting for him to enwrap them in his sweet, adoring arms. So he tapped his foot with a moderate amount of impatience and glanced at his watch as he waited for an attendant to assign him a cab. When it was finally his turn in the queue, Hilbert gleefully deposited his single carry-on luggage into the back of the cab and shuffled inside the backseat, shucking off his over-the-shoulder backpack as he settled into the stiff seat.

Once the destination was confirmed—which was Driftveil, as it turned out it had a *highly* recommended deli—they were off.

Hilbert rubbed his knuckles, sliding his palms over one another to generate some friction to heat them up. His blue hoodie was doing a good job at keeping him warm for the moment, but his real jacket was bunched up somewhere in his carry-on. Eventually he would pull it out, most likely in an awkward corner of the deli as he knelt down and tried not to look suspicious or bizarre as he unzipped the luggage situated upward. Setting it down on the ground just to open it was a little excessive, even for Hilbert.

Thankfully, he had very few pieces of clothing to shuffle through—the wonders and joys of traveling throughout a world where tweens, teens, and young adults alike could get away with wearing the same outfit day in and day out without anyone batting an eye, eh?—and he had purposefully put it at the top for easy access. Hilbert could tug it loose and wrap it around his shoulders with no problem… so long as it didn't fight him or the zipper teeth on the way out.

Driving away from the airport made the drive a little longer than necessary, but that was expected. While they waited for the traffic to settle and inch forward bit by bit, Hilbert stared out the window.

His breath fogged up the glass and he resisted the urge to draw a smiley face on it—the driver certainly wouldn't appreciate his whimsy.

Once they made it past the airport territory and finally made headway towards the deli, Hilbert watched as the residential part of Driftveil crept into view. He huffed a laugh at white wire lawn ornaments twisted into the shape of Deerling and Sawsbuck with blinking red noses from the bulbs wrapped inside of the sculptures. There was a good foot of snow piled up everywhere, which gave Hilbert hope that Nimbasa might have received a white backdrop for its extravagant lightshow later in the night. He'd find out soon enough, but until then he was crossing his fingers.

Hilbert felt his stomach rumble its demands. He patted it idly, and reminded it that soon—*soon* they would receive the object of their adoration. Already he could taste the way the eggs and cheese would melt on his tongue as his teeth crunched on the slightly burnt bacon, just the way he liked it.

He was, of course, referring to the most sacred of all Unovan foods—
a breakfast bagel sandwich.

That previous tangent about Unovan stereotypes? One may point out that small contradiction of said previous statement, but in doing so they would fail to consider one crucial fact—it was an undeniable fact that Unovan bagels were the best bagels out there, and anyone who disagreed was simply jealous.

Was it the history behind them? The water of Unova itself? Or maybe just a long standing comedy bit that no Unovan wanted to give up without losing all pride and dignity?

Yes. All of the above.

Jokes aside, Hilbert mused on how it was always the little things that you miss when away from home for so long. He had met so many amazing people, tried food that he had never heard of before getting introduced to it, and made so many important memories that he would cherish for years to come. Hilbert knew people that would kill to experience the life he had lived, and he was barely past his twenties.

Yet sometimes, all of that meant little when biting into a sandwich and frowning at the taste. It was a subtle difference, some chemical reaction in his brain that picked up and focused on everything that wasn't the same as what he grew up with. It was a feeling that snuck up on him as he biked around Kalos, thinking about how he would love nothing more than to drop in on his mother to surprise her with a recounting of all the ridiculous—and unsafe—adventures he found himself stumbling into with bruises and scraped knees to prove it, just to realize that an entire body of water separated the two of them. It manifested itself as the slight fear that he would come home just to find that things changed.

But, at the same time, it was the refreshing feeling of knowing that he had grown in his absence too that mollified his uneasy homesickness. Even though the decorations changed, Unova was still as brightly polished in greens, reds, and golds for the season. Just because he couldn't see his mom right then and there didn't mean that he would never see her again—and when he finally got the chance he would have so much to tell her, and she him, carrying on conversations well into the night.

And while he craved the taste of a Unovan-style bagel, it just meant that the next time he had one his mouth would water as he sunk into every bite with ravenous delight.

To which Hilbert did exactly that as soon as he was sat in the booth at the quaint Driftveil deli, suitcase situated beside him, winter coat draped across his lap, and a poppy seed bagel with extra cream cheese with chives practically oozing with the excess spread down onto the paper laying on the table. With every bite his teeth sunk into the soft dough of the bagel, the food melting in his mouth and his body melted in his seat as he was in pure heaven.

Hilbert congratulated himself on his restraint on indulging on just the one bagel in advance of his homecoming. It was a very long flight. He felt he deserved to eat so that when he returned home his stomach didn't interrupt the heartfelt reunion with a loud and demanding gurgle.

Wiping his mouth with the thin, brown napkins that were thrown in his to-go bag, Hilbert crumpled his wrapper and abandoned his post to throw it out. Turning, he stared at his assembly of bags and nodded in firm determination.

He cracked his knuckles… and started strapping bags down with his backpack straps, belt, and suitcase.

It was a miracle that he made it to Nuvema Town with only one mishap that was better lost to the annals of time. Hilbert counted his blessings that people had places to go, family to visit, stores to harass over-worked retail workers in, etc. rather than take a moment to point and laugh at the former Champion of Unova falling over himself and nearly losing all of his precious cargo.

Traversing his quiet, sleepy hometown was the final hurdle that was more of a frolic through a grassy field as Hilbert was confident with every path he walked down. In what felt as though no time at all, he was in front of his mother's house and knocking on her door.

From the inside, he could hear the shuffle of slippered feet pause before redirecting toward the door. Clearly, his mother must not have been expecting visitor's today which made Hilbert even more grateful that he had planned so meticulously to visit her on the Solstice instead of after. He would have come sooner, but… the grand reveal a la a Pokestar Studios Holiday-film was too much to pass up on.

He freed his hands by lowering the packed to the brim, brown bag to the stoop and waited for her to open the door.

The first thing he noticed when the door finally opened to reveal her was that she had more gray in her hair than the last time they saw each other in person. It was streaked through her scalp and it matched nicely the silver snowflake earrings that she was wearing at the moment. Her eyes, cradled by crows feet, widened in shock at the sight of her darling son at her doorstep and between her realizing that it really was him and the next moment, Hilbert rushed forward to envelope her in a hug.

"Oh–!" she exclaimed in surprise before melting into the gesture, hugging him back fiercely.

They talked, often, but phone calls just couldn't quite capture the sound of hearing her voice in person, nor could it relay the distinct smell of her mulberry perfume as he leaned in close to hug her. Hilbert held on tight, squeezing her with all of his might, finding it funny that he had to lean down to wrap himself around her. It wasn't that long ago that he could only reach her waist and yet now, if he wanted, he could rest his chin on the top of her head.

They pulled away, both sides reluctant to let go. His mother smiled, eyes watery as she cradled his face, "Oh, Hilbert. Look at how grown you got. You're so big now."

"I'm pretty sure you actually shrunk," he joked, leaning into her hand. He leaned down to press his lips lightly against the corner of her eye, pulling back as he said, "It's good to see you, Mom."

"It's good to see you too," she wiped stray tears out of her eye. "This is certainly the best present I could have received today! And here I thought I was going to spend the day all alone, just me and a small dinner. You sneak! How long have you been planning this?"

"A while, I wanted to surprise you," he admitted. And while he would have loved to delve into a conversation right then and there, it was still cold out and a small flurry of snowflakes had started to come down on them, sticking itself to his brown hair. "Can we take this inside?"

"Of course!" She opened the door wider and stepped out of the way to make room for him and his luggage.

Which was perfect as Hilbert started to unload bag after bag after bag of Unovan-style bagels—and a few other breakfast sandwiches thrown in there as well—into the foyer of the house. And there truly was no disguising the contents of the bags as the bagels were practically spilling out of the top of them.

His mother watched with baffled eyes before pinching her brow, "Hilbert… This is excessive."

"Mom, I promise you, this was absolutely necessary!" Hilbert started to argue, kicking his suitcase in last, with a brown bag of bagels practically suffocating as it was strangled by the straps he secured it with. "Do you know how long it's been since I had proper bagels? Of a bagel that needs no toppings or additional ingredients to uplift it? *The taste is all wrong in other regions."*

She pinched his cheek, finding it cute that even after their years apart, her son was still that same goofy boy who didn't think to bring a proper pair of running shoes on his Pokemon journey.

"Even so, you didn't need to buy this many. Don't get me wrong, it is a lovely surprise to enjoy a late brunch with you today, but there is no possible way that we can eat all of these today let alone later in the week before they get stale!"

Hilbert shut the door behind him. "I know, which is sort of why I may or may not have invited Cheren and Bianca over for brunch as well… and also maybe Clay. And Burgh. And also Alder, who said that he would bring Benga with him."

He watched her eyes go as wide as dinner plates, which was ironic because she actually had a rather nice set of ivory colored plates that would be perfect for his impromptu gathering.

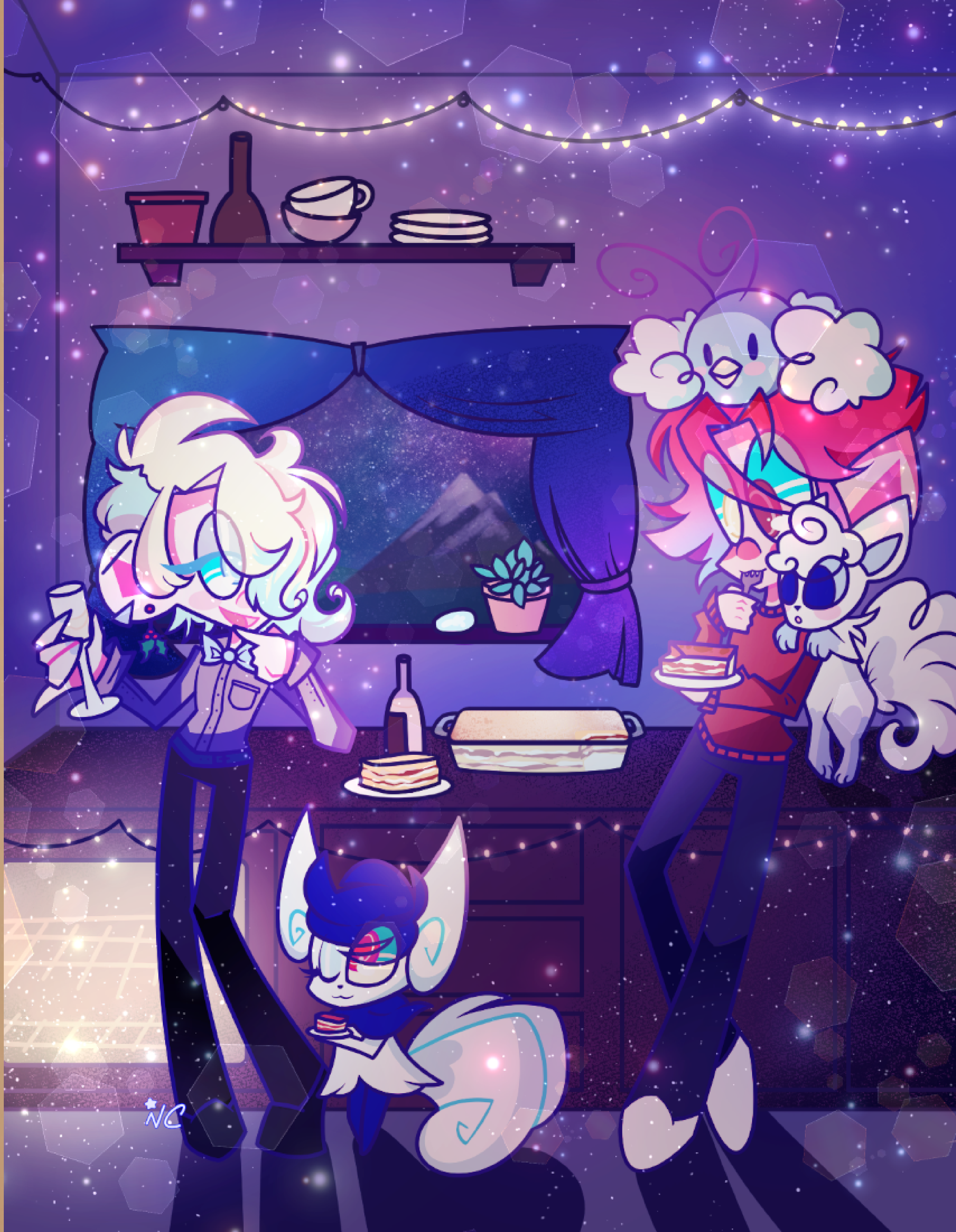
Sheepishly, he rose his shoulders up to his ears, "Surprise? At least you'll definitely won't be alone for the Solstice today!"

Hilbert knew that her swatting him with her apron was absolutely deserved, and his chest hurt from laughing his stomach to stitches all the while she ranted about how he would do all the work preparing the house for guests in less than thirty minutes. And he did it with no complaints!

Mostly because his mouth was stuffed full of a bacon egg and cheese with salt, pepper, ketchup bagel—the exact breakfast order that he had longed after for eons whilst abroad, soon to be joined by all of his dearest friends and loved ones.

"Weather Forecast: Salt, Pepper, and Snowflakes"

Author: EVTrainingUniversity



MINTY CONEY

Merry Christmas
Squirtle
SANTA

Traditions Are Made At Home

Even with the memories of her life before Hisui still being missing, Akari knew that she had never celebrated the Winter Solstice before. She knew because she hadn't experienced an indescribable feeling of familiarity back when Professor Laventon had first told her about it. But now that the day itself was here, Akari wasn't exactly feeling celebratory.

While she had integrated herself into Jubilife Village pretty well, something about trying to join their holidays just didn't feel right to her. It made her feel invasive, like she would somehow be taking advantage of everyone if she tried to waltz in like she belonged there.

Akari had tried to think of something she could do to have something to contribute, but her mind had drawn a blank each time. As a result, she had ultimately decided to just stay in her room in an effort to avoid the potential disappointment. Even if it was a little bit pathetic, she felt better being snug in her room with her Pokémon if it meant being away from the chances of regret.

"Missss…" came the smooth voice of her Mismagius, which snapped Akari out of her thoughts. She turned to see her friend looking at her with concern, and she placed one of her cloth-like hands on her shoulder.

Knowing that Mismagius was worried about her, Akari reached out and affectionately massaged her neck. "I'm sorry," she said gently, "I just zoned out. I'm okay though, I promise."

Mismagius was skeptical though. She could hear the voices of the people outside who were getting ready to take part in the village festivities, and she found it unusual that Akari wasn't concerned with joining them. She'd thought that everything between Akari and the residents of Jubilife Village had been settled now, especially after Commander Kamado had issued a public apology for all of the bad things he'd ever said about her. Though it seemed her trainer didn't quite feel the same way.

Picking up on her companion's woes, Akari simply shook her head. "Celebrations like these are for the people who have already been a part of them for a long time," she told her, "If they wanted me to be there, Professor Laventon or Rei would have invited me directly. Since they didn't do that… It's better to not assume."

Though that didn't sound right to Mismagius, she decided to not press the issue for now. Besides, she and Akari's other Pokémon had already been planning something special anyway, so it wasn't like they were going to be sitting around doing nothing.

Right on cue, there was a knock at the back door, which confused Akari since she hadn't been expecting any guests that night. However, she was in for a surprise when she saw her Hisuian Decidueye, Togekiss, and Ambipom standing there. They had gone on a picking spree of Sitrus, Pecha, and Leppa berries, with them gathering so many that they looked as though they were getting ready for hibernation.

"Oh, you all…" Akari said, feeling very touched. She knew they'd probably had a bit of a hard time finding so many berries in the middle of winter, but they'd done it for her, and she couldn't deny how happy she felt.

Once they were inside, Akari decided she wanted to do something special with the berries. It was tempting to just start eating them, but that felt far too simple. Something within her was stirring, and her thoughts were finally starting to make some connections.

Akari could just vaguely remember eating a type of mochi, but it had a chilled inside and wasn't like anything she had tasted in Hisui. She couldn't remember what it was called, but the concept was clear, and the desire to have it was now eating away at Akari's thoughts like some kind of parasite.

After some deliberation, Akari gestured for her Pokémon to get close, and they all promptly huddled around her. "Okay, here's how we'll do this," she whispered, "Ambipom, I want you to go to the Wallflower and find glutinous rice flour and sugar. Mismagius, I want you to go to the well and fetch a bucket of water."

Understanding their assignments, the two Pokémon immediately made their way out the back door, picking up on the unspoken notion that Akari wanted them to try and stay out of sight.

Once they were gone, Akari continued. "Arcanine, I want you to go to the Wallflower and grab one of those potato starch bags that Beni keeps outside. Just one should be enough," she said, "And Togekiss, I want you and Ninetales to go to the general store and look for cream and milk. If you can't find much, that's fine. Just get what you can."

The three Pokémon with new orders followed Ambipom and Mismagius's lead and left through the back door, leaving just Akari and Decidueye. Decidueye looked at Akari expectantly, and she nodded at him. "You and I are going to mash up these berries," she told him, a little grin on her face, "We're going to mash them up until there's no solid chunks left. Okay?"

That sounded reasonable to Decidueye, who was always happy to be involved in casual things whenever there weren't any battles to fight. So they immediately got to work, with Decidueye using his strength to break the berries apart before putting the smaller pieces into a bowl for Akari to knead with her hands.

The berries were being crushed into a paste, with the three different kinds being kept separate in their own bowls. It made Decidueye wonder what they were making, though he decided to just wait and see since he figured he would find out shortly.

As they worked, Akari's other Pokémon started returning from the missions they had been sent on. Mismagius with a bucket full of water, Ambipom with bags of rice flour and sugar in his two tails, and Arcanine with a bag of potato starch. Everything was slowly starting to come together, and Akari could feel her excitement growing.

Finally, Togekiss and Ninetales returned with the milk and cream, and their arrival was perfectly timed. Akari and Deicidueye had just finished mashing the berries, and Akari was almost glowing as she giddily clapped her sticky hands, which made her Pokémon happy to see.

"Okay then…someone bring me the milk and cream," Akari requested, and Ambipom immediately complied with an eager smile on his face, "Arcanine, can you light a fire?"

Arcanine complied and shot a tiny ember into the fireplace, producing a controlled fire. With that, Akari poured milk, cream, and sugar into the berry paste, still using her hands for the mixing.

Decidueye and Mismagius did their best to assist her with the other two bowls, and they tried to replicate her actions as closely as possible with the limbs or powers they had available.

Once Akari was satisfied with the contents of her bowl, she placed it over the fire to warm it up. "Togekiss, can you get me a spoon?" she asked sheepishly, "I think you'd agree that you wouldn't want me sticking my hands in there."

Togekiss could certainly agree with that, and so she dutifully fetched a wooden spoon as requested. Akari then used it to continuously stir the warming paste, and the six Pokémon all tried to take a peak for themselves. In the bowl, they could see how the sugar crystals were slowly dissolving, almost like diamonds being swallowed by the earth.

Once it was done, Akari signaled for Arcanine to take the bowl off the fire, promptly replacing it with another. She repeated the process of stirring the warming mixture periodically until the sugar crystals had dissolved before having Arcanine safely remove it, then she did the same thing with the third bowl.

The three bowls now appeared to contain thick fruit sludge, and Ambipom almost leaned down to taste some. However, he was smacked back by Mismagius before he could get very far, instantly falling in line when she glared at him to tell him to be patient. She didn't want to risk anything being messed up, especially since this was clearly something important to Akari.

"Alright, Ninetales. Your turn," Akari said to her frosty companion, "We need these to be chilled, but not frozen."

Never one to say she couldn't do something, Ninetales nodded as Arcanine moved the bowls closer to each other. Once he was out of the way, she started using Icy Wind, manually directing the wind and ice crystals to only float over the three bowls so that the entire house didn't freeze.

A part of cooking that would normally take maybe two hours had been done in only two minutes thanks to the power of Pokémon, much to Akari's delight. That allowed her to focus on the more fun parts of culinary creation rather than be stuck waiting for something to happen, and she could imagine having the finished product in front of her much faster.

Once the paste was chilled, Akari grabbed her spoon once again and began churning it. This was definitely going to be the hardest part since she was doing it all by hand, but she was willing to do it, even if things got a little messy in the process.

To Akari's amusement though, her Pokémon decided to take matters into their own hands rather than just sit there and watch. Togekiss fetched two more spoons for Decidueye and Mismagius, and the two of them immediately got to work with churning as well. Decidueye could hold the bowl steady thanks to the grip of his wings, but Mismagius needed Ambipom to use his twin tails to hold hers, since she had to focus her psychic powers on moving the spoon. Akari giggled as she watched them work, which was only exacerbated when Arcanine playfully licked her face to show his support.

Though churning by hand could only get her so far, Akari wasn't going to waste time fussing over details. If worse came to worse, she could just figure something out for next time. For now, she just needed to keep herself focused, continuing to churn her cold, creamy concoction until it looked like the perfect mix of solid and liquid.

"Alright, I think that's the best we're going to get," Akari commented, which made Decidueye and Mismagius look up, "The next step is to roll this frozen cream into little balls so that we can start making the mochi."

This time, Ambipom and Togekiss stepped up to volunteer their services, and Akari could immediately understand what they were thinking. If she made the mochi while the others worked on the frozen cream, then they could get things done more efficiently, which would in turn allow them to enjoy the finished product sooner.

With that silent agreement in place, Akari stood up to wash her hands, needing them to not be sticky for the next steps even if she knew that they were undeniably going to get sticky again. That was all part of the process though, and she believed it would be worth it.

Upon returning to her spot on the floor, Arcanine set another clean bowl in front of her, earning himself a few scratches under his chin. Akari then filled the bowl with some of the rice flour and sugar that had been fetched before, creating a puff of flour dust in the air. Ninetales curiously attempted to eat some, but she immediately regretted that and stuck her mouth in the bucket of water in order to wash it out.

"Not too much, Ninetales. We still need that water," Akari said as she tried to not laugh, though a few chuckles still escaped her. Ninetales sulked in response, but Ambipom patted her on the back with one of his tails in an attempt to cheer her up, which seemed to work.

After pouring some water into the giant clump of dry powder, Akari began stirring it until it started to look more like liquid. Sadly, Beni was a boring cook and only had white glutinous rice flour, which caused her mixture to look more like milk. However, Akari figured that the color of the berry paste would be able to make up for that.

Once her new mixture was smooth, Akari gestured for Arcanine to bring the bowl to the fireplace, and he used his paw to shift the embers around and bring the fire back to life without needing to blow another flame into it. While the new bowl warmed up, Akari used her spoon to fold its contents over repeatedly, waiting for it to look shiny.

"Alright, perfect!" Akari said eventually, as the mochi now looked more like soft dough instead of sludge, "Ambipom, can you fetch me some parchment paper?"

Ambipom was all too happy to help, and Togekiss went with him to fetch the rolling pin, as she had a feeling it would be needed. Once she had it, Akari dusted the parchment paper with a thin layer of potato starch before she then started scooping the mochi dough out of the bowl in clumps, while Ambipom held onto the rolling pin in anticipation.

Once all of the mochi dough had been moved onto parchment paper, Akari dusted each clump with more potato starch, as she really wanted to make sure that nothing would stick together. Even when she finally accepted the rolling pin, she kept an eye on the mochi as she rolled it out in order to be sure that nothing stuck.

However, she had only finished rolling out the first clump when Ambipom decided to steal the rolling pin back from her. "If you want to help, you can just say so," Akari teased, as there was no reason for her to be angry when she knew that he was just trying to be involved and have fun.

"Am! Ambi!" Ambipom responded with a cheeky smile, and he then started to roll out one of the other clumps of dough. He wasn't as refined as Akari though, so Arcanine used his paws to help keep the parchment paper in place, in order to help keep things a bit more organized.

Seeing that Decidueye and Mismagius were almost done rolling up the paste, Akari turned to Ninetales once more. “Can you help me chill these? We’re almost done having you freeze things, I promise,” she reassured her, hoping that she wouldn’t feel stuck in a single role.

However, Ninetales seemed much less bothered by the notion than Akari, and she was happy to chill the flattened mochi dough as requested. She knew that her powers helped to shorten the work time significantly, and she was actually quite proud to know that she was indispensable.

Togekiss then brought over a sharp knife, which initially made the rest of her Pokémon draw back in surprise. However, that knife was needed because it was how Akari was going to cut the mochi into manageable pieces, since there weren't any baking tools in Hisui that would allow her to make perfect shapes. So she got to work with cutting the dough apart, with Ambipom continuing to roll out the rest of it while Ninetales immediately chilled whatever he finished.

“Alright, Decidueye! Mismagius! I think we’re ready for the paste!” Akari said excitedly, feeling a sense of glee bubbling within her, “Bring it over here and we’ll see if this works!”

The balls of red, yellow, and pink paste were far from perfect, but Akari didn’t care about that. Nothing about their process was perfect, but they were still having a great time, which was all that really mattered to her. This was the moment of truth though, and so Mismagius levitated a ball of pink paste over to Akari in order to test it out.

Akari took a deep breath as she placed the paste into the glob of dough that she had cut out, and she felt nervous as she started pinching the edges of the dough closed. Completely sealing it was a slow process, but she eventually managed to get it done, and the faces of her Pokémon immediately lit up when they got the chance to see the finished product for themselves.

The amount of dough used was a bit too much in comparison to the filling, but it otherwise looked great. Akari herself could hardly believe how good it had turned out, though she quickly realized that now wasn’t the time for her to be questioning things.

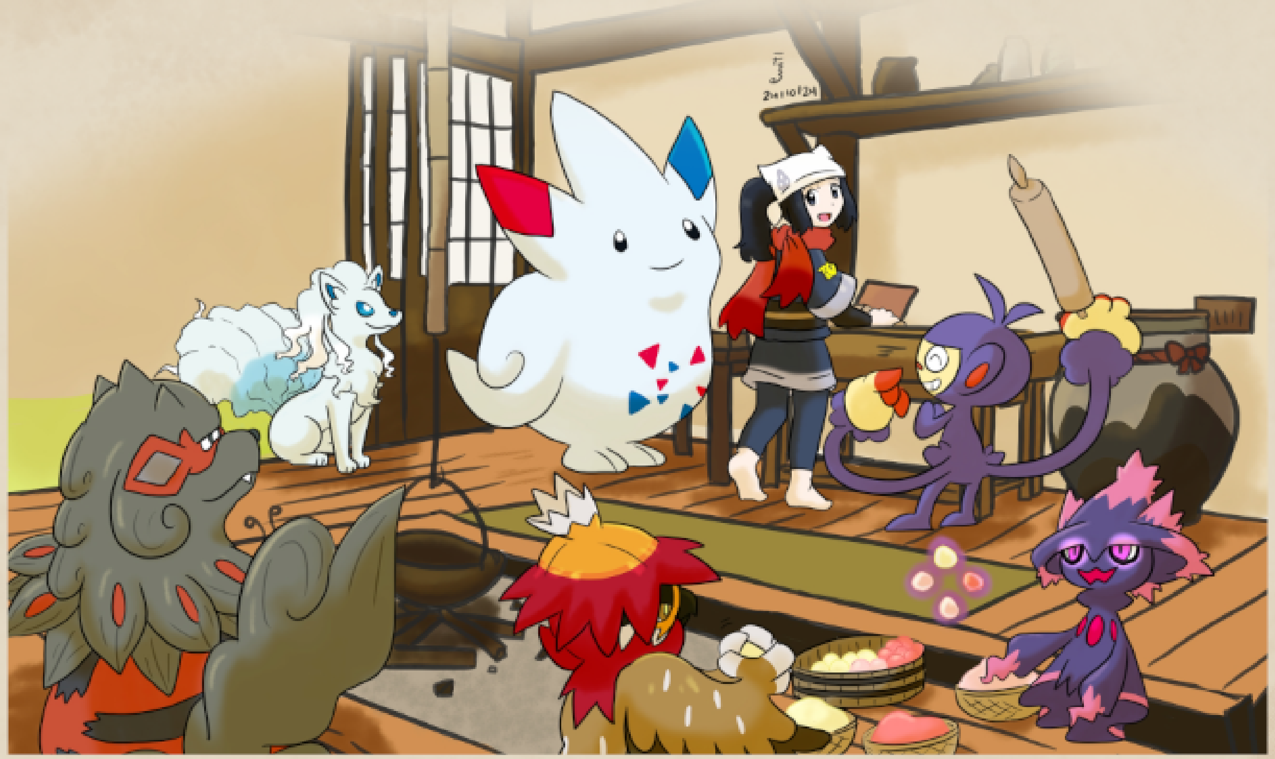
“Ninetales, grab those baskets!” she exclaimed as she tried to keep her emotions steady, “We’ll line the bottom with parchment paper and then store the mochi there.”

Having already finished with her previous task, Ninetales ran for the baskets that Akari had been referring to. They were a bit big, but they would certainly hold all of the mochi, which was good considering that they were clearly going to be making a lot.

While she did that, Ambipom went to grab more parchment paper now that his twin tails were available again, as he’d heard Akari say they’d need it. He and Ninetales worked together to set up the baskets, and Mismagius used her psychic powers to place the first completed mochi into one of them, already having a plan to keep things organized.

Mismagius then went back to using her powers to hand berry paste to Akari so that she could seal them in dough, while Decidueye took over the responsibility of cutting out new dough. Since he didn’t want to risk not providing enough, he kept his cuts around the same size as Akari’s had been, even if they were a bit too big.

The next few minutes ended up becoming a complete blur, as Akari’s mind was focused solely on smushing dough around filling while Mismagius kept everything flowing like a water wheel. As they worked though, Akari could feel her excitement continuing to grow, with her almost completely forgetting how anxious she had been earlier.



Once the first basket was full, Ninetales used her icy powers to completely freeze the mochi this time, since she knew they'd probably melt quite quickly if she didn't. That was fine with Akari because she wanted the mochi supply to last for a while, and waiting for it to thaw wasn't nearly as much of a hassle as cleaning up a melted mess would be.

It wasn't too long before all three baskets were completely full of mochi, meaning that their task was finally complete. It felt strange to say that at first, but once Akari could process it, she smiled lovingly at her Pokémon. "Thank you, everyone…" she said in a hushed tone, "I couldn't have done any of this without you. To make something special for ourselves like this…I just…"

The six Pokémon immediately sprang to attention when they saw that Akari was crying, and they tried their best to comfort her. She was happy with their efforts, but the fact that she'd felt the need to do everything they had just done alone due to not feeling welcome in Jubilife Village's celebrations saddened her, and her Pokémon weren't sure what else to do other than let her know that they were there for her.

Eventually, Akari used her wrist to wipe away her tears, and she took a breath to steady herself. "Well, we should probably clean up," she said out loud, knowing that that was an inevitable part of cooking no matter how much she disliked it, "It would be better if we didn't put it off."

Her Pokémon could agree with that sentiment, so they all quickly got to work in order to make it look as if nothing had happened within the abode. They cleaned up the fireplace area, placed the dirty utensils into the remaining water to soak, and looked for sticky areas of the floor that needed to be wiped down so as to prevent future misery.

Thanks to all seven of them working together, the cleanup process didn't take very long at all, and they were basically back where they'd started. "I'll need to return the remaining sugar and potato starch tomorrow…" Akari mumbled to herself as she looked around, "But we still have the rest of tonight…So what should we do now?"

"Ambi?" came Ambipom's voice as he tugged at Akari's skirt, and she looked down at him curiously. However, she then chuckled when she noticed that her Pokémon had gathered around the baskets of mochi, and it was clear that Ambipom was acting as their mouthpiece to ask if they could have some.

"Alright, alright," Akari responded, understanding their desire to enjoy the fruits of their labor after all of their hard work, "We'll try some together."

That was an exciting thought for everyone, though it immediately had to be put on hold when there was a knock at the front door, much to Akari's surprise. She had no idea who could possibly be there, as she still hadn't been expecting anyone. However, she still walked over to the door and slid it open, finding herself met with Professor Laventon and Rei.

"There you are, Akari! We've been looking everywhere for you!" Rei exclaimed excitedly, though he then turned to the professor with an unamused look, "I told you that we should have checked here first."

Laventon held up his hands defensively. "I concede. You were right, Rei," he said, though he quickly turned his attention back to Akari, "My dear girl, why are you here alone? We were very worried when we realized we couldn't find you anywhere at the village's celebration."

Akari was very surprised by those words, and she knew that her expression probably reflected that. "You were looking for me?" she couldn't help but ask, "You were…expecting me there?"

"Why, of course we were!" Laventon exclaimed, though his expression then dropped, "Oh dear…Were you operating under the assumption that you weren't wanted?"

Akari nodded glumly. "I…I thought that trying to insert myself into something that's already so well established here would be too much to ask, " she confessed, "It didn't feel right for me to join in when I'm an outsider. So I…"

"Hey now. You're not an outsider. Not anymore," Rei said firmly as he took Akari's hands into his own, "This is your home too. You belong here just as much as anyone else. No matter what a few stubborn meatheads might say."

Laventon nodded in agreement. "Indeed. While the circumstances of your arrival may have been strange, your presence is simply a fact of life now," he told her gently, "We would never let anyone try to say you aren't welcome with the rest of us. You are far too important to us for that to be allowed to happen, and your absence created a noticeable hole in the celebration for many people."

Though it was still a bit difficult for her to grasp, Akari felt touched by their words, and she could feel joyful tears swimming in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make anyone worry," she said, "Is it too late for me to join you?"

"Nonsense! It's never too late!" Laventon exclaimed as his eyebrows danced upward, "Grab anything you need and we'll head over there right now! You'll love what they've done to the training grounds to make it look festive!"

Akari nodded, then rushed back inside in order to get ready. She hadn't expected this turn of events, but she welcomed it nonetheless. She wanted to be around her friends at a time like this, so she wasn't going to let the chance go to waste. "Mismagius! Grab the baskets!" she called out as she laced up her boots, "We'll bring the mochi for everyone to share!"

Pleased with the new direction the night was going in, Mismagius levitated the three baskets before making her way outside alongside the other Pokémon. Akari herself was ready to go just seconds later, and she quickly rushed outside in order to join everyone else.

However, Akari was slightly surprised to see Decidueye handing mochi to Laventon and Rei, giving them the honor of being the first ones to try it. They took their first curious bites right as Akari reached them, and she was just in time to see their eyes widen in response.

"Oh my, that's quite cold!" Laventon exclaimed, fanning his mouth due to the sudden brain freeze he had received.

Meanwhile, Rei looked very happy, barely fazed by how cold it was. "Mmmm…This is so good," he mused, "What did you use to make this? Sitrus berries?"

"There's three different kinds. Sitrus, Pecha, and Leppa," Akari answered as she felt her cheeks flush, "This is a type of mochi that I remembered from my past, and I wanted to see if I could make it myself."

Rei grinned from ear to ear. "Well, I'd say that it's a great success!" he said cheekily, "I'm sure everyone else will love it too!"

Though he was still somewhat frazzled, Laventon did his best to nod. "Jolly good, I say!" he said enthusiastically, "Now come! Let's join everyone else!"

With that, they were on their way, and Rei grabbed onto Akari's hand as they went. While Akari didn't love how tight his grip could be, she actually didn't mind it this time due to how cold it was outside, so she just let it happen. She had misjudged the situation enough already, and she didn't want to sour the mood again now that it was brightening.

Decidueye then offered Akari some mochi, and she didn't hesitate to accept it. While biting into it made her teeth feel like they were going to shatter, the mochi itself was thankfully delicious, and it did sort of remind her of home even though she still couldn't remember why. However, she supposed she could relate that sentiment to Hisui now, since it was her new home that she had no intention of forgetting.

Before long, the group reached the training grounds, which really had been transformed into quite the festive space. Tables of food reached as far as the eye could see, and people were talking and dancing under the warm light of many lanterns. Akari could make out many familiar faces in the crowd, with Adaman and Irida in particular smiling and waving the moment they saw her.

Maybe she hadn't expected to have a place in Hisui, but her friends were continuing to prove that she undeniably did, and it made Akari realize that she needed to stop worrying so much. These were the people that she loved, and they clearly loved her too. So rather than potentially widening the gap that had once existed between them, she could instead think about how she had brought herself closer to them, making their traditions something that she could enjoy right alongside them.

"Traditions Are Made At Home"

Author: Elithesia Autem Danguarde

Emily

Odyssey

If one had to choose one adjective to describe Brendan Birch, it would probably be "well-traveled." Despite his tender age, he'd sojourned from one end of the Hoenn region to the other and everywhere in-between. From the sun-dappled tranquility of Petalburg Woods to the steamy, lava-heated caves of Mt. Chimney to the sandstorm-blasted ruins of the central desert to even the cold, dark depths of the surrounding seas, Brendan had braved nearly every climate that the continent and local islands had to offer. As such, he was at a point in his journey in which there were few situations that would prompt him to think, Well, this is new.

Quite remarkable, then, that he'd been on Izabe Island for less than twenty-four hours and had remarked such at least half a dozen times already.

One couldn't blame him, really. In fact, Brendan had come to the island for the express purpose of experiencing new things. It was the only locale in the entirety of the Hoenn region that boasted any sort of snowy climate. Granted, said snow was limited to the frosted peaks of its towering mountain, seeing as the island was still situated in the same equatorial climate as the rest of the region. Still, it was enough to host a healthy population of Pokémon that couldn't be found anywhere else in the region—and that was all the reason Brendan needed to make the sparsely-populated, densely forested, and tantalizingly mysterious Izabe Island a stop on his ongoing journey. Of course, he'd had yet to see snow in his life, having grown up in Littleroot Town and the rest of Hoenn too warm in climate to support truly cold winters, so the opportunity to do so was just a pleasant bonus—or so he'd thought.

He'd quite forgotten that where there was snow, there was also the potential of *blizzards.*

"Ack! S-s-s-so cold!" he gasped as the already bone-chilling gales that were assaulting the mountain pass whipped up into a frenzy. The wind's icy fingers ripped at his clothes, hell-bent on shredding his thick overcoat and windbreaker to shreds. It tugged at his hair like it wanted to tear every last strand from his head. It scratched at his already red, cold-blistered cheeks, making the tears spilling from his watering eyes sting as they rolled down.

Indeed, the howling wind was merciless in its attack on the hapless youth, as if seeking to punish him for the sin of wandering into the snowy wilds even mildly underprepared. Of course, despite as unaccostomed to snow as Brendan was, he hadn't just traipsed off into the great white unknown like it was just another jaunt down Route 101. He knew better than that. He had been sure to purchase proper winter gear and read up on the dangers of snowy climates. He had stuck to the well-traveled paths from the nearby village rather than venture off into the great white unknown, at least for this first venture, and had made sure to keep key landmarks in sight at all times. At the first sign of inclement weather, he had turned tail and immediately started heading to the closest suitable shelter that he'd made note of: an old, abandoned log cabin. Unfortunately, the blizzard had rolled over him just as he'd spotted it upon a hill cresting over the snowy horizon, and it had vanished into the veil of flurrying snow the swept him up in what felt like a mere instant.

All the best clothes, preparatory reading, and good sense still couldn't prepare one for the realities of winter travel, and Brendan was finding that out the hard way: the cold was brutal. Still, despite the onslaught, Brendan pushed on, wading through the knee-deep drifts of fresh snow with one arm held up in front of his face in a vain effort to shield his eyes from the piercing ice crystals swirling within the wailing billows. He was nothing if not stubborn. This wasn't the first tough clime that he'd braved in his search for Pokémon, and he wasn't so bad off yet that it threatened to be his last. As long as he found shelter soon, he would be fine…

"Wh-wh-where c-could that c-cabin b-be?"

At his exclamation, Brendan's Swellow, which was somehow fighting the fierce air currents to fly overhead, released a shrill cry of its own and dropped its altitude until it was only a few feet above Brendan's head. It chittered at him, cocking its head as it worriedly assessed him. Brendan smiled reassuringly at his feathered friend and gave him a thumbs-up, trying not to stress about the fact that he couldn't really feel said thumb despite it being sheltered in warm, Mareep-wool mittens.

"I-I-I'm g-g-good!" Brendan reassured through his chattering teeth. His Swellow cooed disbelievingly, prompting Brendan to shake his head insistingly. "R-r-really! J-j-just k-k-keep l-l-looking! I kn-know I s-s-saw a c-c-cabin ea-ea-earlier! W-We m-m-must b-be c-c-close b-by n-now!"

His Swellow trilled again, then soared back up to its lofty height, keen eyes scanning their surroundings for any sign of their only hope of salvation. Meanwhile, Brendan kept trudging onward, doggedly pushing through the rising snow drifts in the direction he'd last seen the cabin. Admittedly, after several more grueling minutes, Brendan was beginning to despair that he'd somehow gotten turned around and was tromping not toward the cabin, but toward nothing but certain death, alone in the cold and icy wilderness. Just as the doubt began to creep into his mind, his Swellow cried out once more, its sharp eyes having finally spotted what it was searching desperately for.

Brendan squinted against the whirling wind and exclaimed joyfully when he made out the blocky silhouette of the cabin in the near distance, a darker gray smudge in the swirl of pale greys and whites surrounding him. The sight of it renewed his fraying vigor, allowing him to plow the remaining yards to his promise of shelter with relative ease. As he finally came upon its snow-dusted, ice-encrusted, half-collapsed wooden porch, Brendan's Swellow swooped down to land on the railing, chittering as it began to preen ice crystals from its feathers.

“Y-y-you d-d-did w-well,” Brendan huffed gratefully as he retrieved its Pokéball and held it up. “R-rest u-u-up n-now.”

As soon as his faithful companion was safe, snug, and warm inside its Pokéball, Brendan wasted no time in bustling himself inside his own shelter. The door wasn't too rusty, but it opened to the outside, forcing Brendan to fight the howling wind to open it. It took some effort to pry it open just enough to squeeze his body through the gap between it and the threshold, but once he did and the door slammed shut behind him, his relief was instantaneous.

“Ahh… Much better…” he sighed, relishing the rush of what felt like warm air surrounding him. It probably wouldn't stay that way for long; his body would adjust to the ambient temperature in time and probably find it quite brisk, too. Still, he was finally free of the incessant wind, at least, so he took a few moments to enjoy said freedom before getting down to business and assessing his new surroundings.

“Hmm… I don't hear or feel any drafts… That's good,” Brendan mumbled to himself as he combed the four walls of the room and inspected its one large, frost-encrusted window.

Thankfully, the cabin had not been abandoned so long that the fireplace had entirely filled with snow; it only took a few minutes of shoveling to clear the hearth. He retrieved some wooden chairs from the adjoining dining room and, with his Sceptile's assistance, dismantled them into suitably-sized pieces to serve as fuel for a fire. Finding good kindling was a little trickier, as the open fireplace had allowed damp to seep into most of the paper objects in the room, but he finally managed to locate some books stowed away in a side table drawer that seemed dry enough to use a few pages. He carefully stacked the logs onto the metal holder, summoned his Magcargo to spit a little fire onto the corner of the kindling, hastily dropped the ignited kindling into the logs, and then used the nearby bellows to pump air into the crackling embers, praying that the finished furniture would catch fire. It took a minute or so, but eventually, flames began to lick at the shards of wood, and heat began to spill readily from the hearth as they readily caught fire.

“Thank goodness! I probably would've been all right as long as I was out of the wind, but having a fire sure makes it comfier!” Brendan sighed in relief, smiling as he used his wrist to wipe away the sweat that had started to bead on his forehead from all the fervent pumping of the bellows, which he set aside with his other hand. He basked in the growing glow of the fire for a moment, then placed the grate in front of it to keep the crackling embers from fluttering out onto the wooden floor while he moved on to his next task: filling his very empty belly.

“Yeah, yeah, stop your grumbling,” Brendan chastised his stomach when it growled insistently, walking across the room to where he'd dumped his backpack. He crouched down and opened the flap to begin rooting around in one of the larger pockets. “Now, let's see what I'm working with here…”

Brendan didn't have the chance to pull out so much as a single berry before he heard something that had him scrambling to the window in a panic: the unmistakable howls of what sounded like several Mightyena, all coalescing into a haunting chorus as they converged on the cabin.

“What the—?! I was trying to make dinner, not be dinner!” Brendan groaned as he anxiously peered out the window, trying to spot the approaching Pokémon within the whorl of white raging just beyond the frosted pane. With the thick layer of ice coating the glass and the swirling white wind, however, Brendan could discern little more than fuzzy shadows flitting through the snow.

It was impossible to tell how many there were, exactly, but based on what he'd heard, he estimated at least half a dozen; more worrisome, however, was the fact that there were several taller, broader, lumbering shadows amidst the canine-shaped ones flitting lithely through the plumes. Had the Mightyena here taken to teaming up with larger, more aggressive Pokémon while hunting prey in some sort of symbiotic relationship?

Just as Brendan began to reach for one of the Pokéballs hanging at his waist, a different cry emerged from the excited barks and yips of the Mightyena echoing all around the cabin—a cry that was very clearly that of a person.

"P-P-Pardon our int-t-trusion, b-b-but, w-we're c-c-c-coming in!"

The average reaction would be to rush to the person's aid, or perhaps to rush to keep them out; Brendan did no rushing whatsoever, only stood at the window in slack-jawed shock. For this was not quite an average situation. Brendan knew that voice, and knew it well, well enough to question if he'd even heard it at all. Because surely, surely, the person who belonged to it couldn't be here of all places—

The cabin door flung open, and half a dozen Team Aqua grunt came bursting through it with such fervor that they tripped over one another and landed in a heap of tangled limbs and shivering bodies. Flopped on his belly, groaning tiredly, and buried under his wiggling underlings was none other than Archie himself, his black beard so dusted with snow and ice that Brendan would think it were actually white if he didn't know any better. The horde of Mightyena came bounding over them, barking and yipping with excitement; they were so relieved to escape the cold that they ignored the shell-shocked Brendan altogether, instead clambering in a mess of fur and paws to all pile up in front of the fire in one big, furry, contented huddle. The vacuum created by the swirling wind soon slammed the door shut, and the resounding *bang!* is what snapped Brendan out of his stupor.

"You!" he shouted, pointing his finger accusingly at Archie.

"*You!*" Archie yelled back. It took a few seconds for him to wiggle about and wrench his arm free of the weight of his lackeys, but he did just that, pointing his gloved finger right back at Brendan. "What are you doing here?!"

"I could ask you the same question!" Brendan shot back. "Up to your old tricks again? I don't care if it's in the middle of a blizzard, if you're on this island to cause trouble, we'll take this outside—"

"No, no, no, not back outside!" the gaggle of grunts wailed in unison.

"We're not here to cause trouble! Honest!" one of the male grunts sniffled.

"Yeah!" a female grunt chimed in agreement. "We were just here for a team-building excursion!"

"That's right! An excursion!" a third grunt insisted with a frantic nod. "We were in a nearby village on a nice little trip to enjoy some hot springs, do some bonding, yanno—"

"But the boss wanted to go explore, and o'course, some of us went with 'im, yanno, to watch his back—"

"And we got caught in that *awful* blizzard!" the female grunt finished in a doleful wail, pulling frustratedly at her windswept lavender locks. "Ugh, just look at my hair—!"

"Yes, yes, that's the gist of it," Archie sighed exasperatedly, rolling his eyes. "Now that you've gotten the brat caught up to speed, could you lot please *get off me?*"

With a frantic chorus of "Yes, boss!" and "Sorry, boss!", the grunts hurriedly scrambled off of their leader and to their feet. They hunkered bashfully against the wall while Archie slowly climbed to his feet, groaning as he rubbed at his likely sore back. Brendan eyed him warily as he did, his eyes flicking back and forth between his grimacing face and the Pokéballs strapped to his waist. Archie noticed Brendan's wandering eyes and clear distrust, prompting him to raise the hand that wasn't rubbing his lower back in a gesture of surrender.

"Honest, boy, I ain't here to disturb the peace," Archie asserted in a long, tired sigh. "Just lookin' to escape that frightful storm out there. On me honor!"

"Yes, please! Don't throw us back out there!" the female grunt pleaded.

"We'll do anything you want! Anything!" chimed another.

"Just let us stay!" sobbed a third.

Despite his checkered past, Brendan would be hard-pressed to say that Archie had no honor at all. Besides, the group looked absolutely ragged, and far be it from him to leave someone else to fend for themselves in a blizzard. It certainly wasn't honorable to toss people out into the cold and wind, even if they were Team Aqua.

"All right, all right, relax!" Brendan cried over the rising clamor, his raised voice silencing the grunts' back to pitiful sobs and sniffles. "I had no intention of sending you back out in that. Come on, surely you guys don't think that little of me?"

"Aye! He's a good lad. You all know that!" Archie cheered with a guffawing laugh, striding over to Brendan to give him several claps on the back—as if they had been best buds for their entire lives. Brendan gritted his teeth against the stinging slaps of Archie's broad palms against his back and braced himself with one foot, trying not to lose face by being slung forward by the force. Archie seemed not to notice, giving Brendan one last pat to Brendan's shoulder before jaunting across the room to begin inspecting a painting hanging on the nearby wall. He studied it for a moment, then started looking around for something else to occupy his attention—which is when he spied Brendan's open bag.

"Oooh! About to make some grub, were we?" he exclaimed, immediately diving down to begin rooting through Brendan's bag.

Too exhausted to even fight the clear breach of social etiquette, Brendan just watched Archie flip his backpack over and dump all his supplies out with little more than a soulless sigh.

"Yeah… Sure was, before you lot came crashing through the door…"

"Ooh, are you gonna cook us up something nice, boss?" one of the grunts cried excitedly, clapping his hands together in anticipation.

"Oh, yes, please! I'm *starving!*" the female grunt lamented.

"Oooh, oooh, are you gonna make that one thing that we all like?"

"Ah! Please, boss! It's our favorite!"

"Ah, pipe down, you lot!" Archie barked playfully, shooting a quick grin at his team before returning his gaze to the pile of ingredients before him, which he was quickly sorting through. He snatched a tablecloth off a nearby side table to begin piling berries onto it. "You don't mind, do ya, boy?" he asked without looking up at Brendan, then, before he even answered, shot up to march off to the kitchen, leaving the bundle of berries piled neatly on the square tablecloth for a moment.

"No, not at all…" Brendan answered weakly, too disoriented by the strange turn of events that he couldn't muster even an ounce of fake cheer for his response. Honestly more baffled than anything, his voice was flat and weary as he just watched Archie trounce through the door to the dining room and continued, "Go right ahead…"

There came the tremendous clamor of banging pots and pans as Archie plundered the kitchen for tools and, presumably, ingredients. It lasted for several minutes, eventually attracting the attention of the dozing Mightyena, who all raised their heads to stare curiously into the doorway, their black ears sticking straight up. Eventually, however, Archie did come marching out with a menagerie of things piled in his muscular arms; disinterested by what they saw, the Mightyena all yawned in tandem and then plopped their heads back on their paws to resume their group nap.

"All right! Yer in for a treat, boy!" Archie cackled excitedly as he squatted back down and dumped his haul—a bunch of utensils piled into a large cauldron, a smattering of dried herbs and spices, and some other non-perishables he'd ferreted out—by the bundle of berries. He whistled and snapped his fingers at the grunts, who all snapped to attention. "Oi! Don't just stand there, you lot! Come give me a hand. Can't have our host lifting a finger!"

"I'm not exactly your host, but okay…" Brendan mumbled under his breath as the grunts leaped to obey their boss's command, shooting across the room to join him. In a close-knit huddle, they worked quickly and efficiently to prepare the ingredients at Archie's direction. With how closely together they were huddled, Brendan couldn't see much of anything, so he didn't bother trying to watch; instead, he set to moving the furniture to the sides of the room so he could give everyone enough breathing room. It was quite a crowd for such a small cabin, after all, and it wouldn't be long before the atmosphere got stifling.

He ended up creating so much room that he decided to let his Pokémon out of their Pokéballs to stretch their legs. It was a little bit of a tight squeeze, what with the pile of Mightyena and the gaggle of grunts and Archie, but not so much that it was terribly uncomfortable. Brendan's Swellow found a cozy perch atop a bookcase; his Raichu decided to plonk down near the Mightyena and enjoy the fire, and Brendan coaxed his Magcargo into climbing into an empty silver washbasin so it could do the same without melting through the wooden floor; his Breloom curled up under a moth-eaten blanket on the similarly moth-eaten sofa; and his Swampert stretched out on the matching loveseat, which sagged under its weight but did not outright collapse, impressively. By the time that Brendan got his Pokémon settled and sank down into an armchair himself, the cabin was filled with the warmth of the crackling fire, the content chatter of the happy Team Aqua, and the delectable aroma of Archie's concoction, which was bubbling in the cauldron which now hung over the hot flame. Archie was crouched near it, muttering to himself as he continuously stirred the contents while dropping in bits of various seasonings.

Brendan studied him for a moment, then piped up to ask, "Anyway, I thought you lot disbanded after returning the orb to its rightful place? What're you out here doing a 'team-building' exercise for, then?"

"Ah! You'll love this!" Archie crowed as he spun on his heel to grin brightly at Brendan, still crouched. "I originally was gonna disband the group, wanting to do right and all after seeing the error of my ways, but it seemed such a shame to just have everybody go their separate ways. So, I thought to meself, why not find a way to keep everyone together and do right by the world? So, Team Aqua is nowwwwwwww—"

Archie paused dramatically, and all the grunts clapped their hands rapidly against their thighs for a drumroll effect.

"—a charity group focused on the conservation of habitats for marine and freshwater Pokémon!" Archie finished in a cheer, happily waving the wooden spoon he'd been stirring the soup with over his head. "We go all across Hoenn advocating for the balance of natural preservation and urban development!"

"And we do it the right way!" one of the grunts eagerly continued. "It's all non-profit. We rely on fundraisers and donations."

"We don't bully anybody into anything!" Another reassured with a proud grin. "We've worked real hard to make a good name for ourselves now!"

"And we've already had good success with several projects! We've had several habitats declared protected zones for Pokémon. We even got Team Magma doing the same thing for land-based Pokémon!" another gushed.

"That so?" Brendan hummed, admittedly impressed. "Well, I'm glad." And he was, really. He had never pegged Archie—or Maxie, either—as a bad guy. His intentions had always been good. But people could do bad things even with the best intentions, and that didn't change the fact that they were bad things. So, he really was heartened to hear that Archie had learned to redirect his energy into a project that was not only more reasonable than his hare-brained plot to awaken Kyogre, but also one that would honestly do some actual good for Pokémon in the long run.

Didn't mean Brendan trusted him to not ever come up with some other hare-brained scheme that would lead to them butting heads, but he was at least content enough to leave them be for now. Besides, best not to make waves at the moment. There was no telling how long they'd be crammed in this carbon together, weathering out the still very much howling storm; it was better for them all to get along at the moment. Not to mention… whatever Archie was cooking up, it smelled quite delicious indeed. Brendan certainly wasn't going to get Archie riled up before he'd had some of that to fill his hungry belly!

"Yep, I really have to thank you, laddie," Archie hummed, leaving his soup to simmer and striding over to join Brendan by the armchair. "If it weren't for you dogging my heels like you had, I'd've done something quite regrettable. Just think! Where would my poor team and all our Pokémon be if I'd've followed through with that crazy scheme of mine?" he sighed, turning to look at his team, who had all joined their Mightyena in their cuddle party and were now snoozing away, despite their earlier zeal for food. "Certainly not here now, enjoying this fine little occasion."

"Crazy enough that we're here as it is," Brendan chuckled. "Funny how life works out, huh?"

"Aye," Archie agreed, looking back at Brendan with a grin. "Just goes to show you that life is its own journey, and you'll never know where it takes you." Not even a heartbeat after uttering the profound wisdom, Archie sniffed the air, then clapped his hands together loudly, starting all those dozing in the room awake. "A-ha! Soup's just about done, methinks!" he declared before zooming over to the cauldron to inspect his handiwork.

He nodded in satisfaction, then, without looking up, snapped his fingers sharply and commanded, “You there! Go get some bowls, on the double! We have lots of hungry bellies to feed!”

Said bowls were retrieved not on the double, but on the triple; in no time at all, person and Pokémon alike were chowing down on the warm, hearty stew. As he sipped gratefully at the herby, salty broth steaming before his face, Brendan glanced out of his peripheral vision and out the window to see that the snow was still coming down heavily, fat snowflakes dancing in whistling wind. Yes, they would be stuck there a while yet, but that did not seem like such a bad thing at all to Brendan, not at all.

Yes, Brendan was as well-traveled as one could be, but if today had proved anything, his journey had just barely begun. The road of life stretched on before him yet, promising exciting twists and turns. Today, though, was a day to savor how far he had come—to savor a the simple things, like good food, faithful Pokémon, and unlikely friendships.

“Cheers, lads and lassies!” Archie crowed heartily as he hefted his bowl of soup his head, nearly spilling it all over himself in his fervor. “Life is a vast, open sea, and we’re sailing into the blue!”

“Into the blue!” his cohort chorused loudly, also raising their bowls.

“Into the blue,” Brendan murmured with a smile, also raising his bowl just a tad. He caught Archie’s eye as he did, and the man’s smile shined all the brighter, outclassing even the pure white of the snow piling on the nearby windowsill.

“Into the blue,” Archie echoed with a wink, “and beyond the horizon! What we’ll find, none can say, but it’ll be a hell of an adventure, aye?”

“Aye!”

"Odyssey"

Author: Vannah

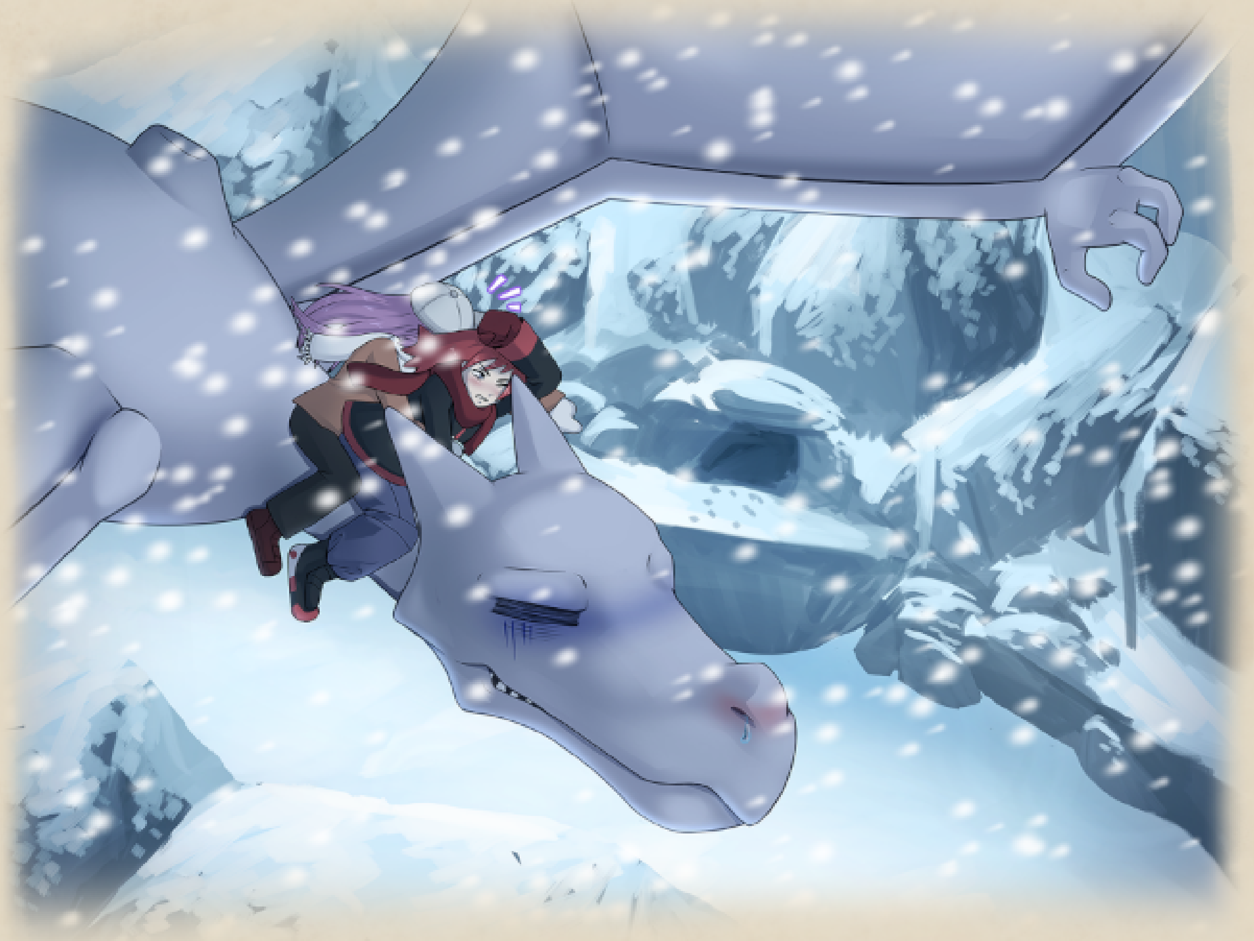
SINFULHARE

Of Moon Stones & Mallets

With a gentle nudge to one of the ridges on Aerodactyl's neck, Dane slowly brought them closer to the dormant fields of western Kanto stretching below them. Silver tightened his grip around Dane's waist as gravity's pull temporarily sparked the reflexive fear of freefall in his stomach. He breathed an annoyed huff into his boyfriend's neck as they leveled out.

"I still can't believe Oak's having us work during the holidays."

"Ha ha. Nature waits for no man. At least we get to spend it together," Dane said, his words turning to mist before his very eyes in the cold, winter air. "That's good enough for me."



"If he had tried to keep us apart, I'd have stormed out of the lab and kidnapped you," Silver grumbled into his nape, and Dane couldn't help but chuckle.

Touching down on one of the small cliffs just in front of the entrance to Mt. Moon's winding cavern system, Dane slid down from Aerodactyl's back. They didn't want to disturb the native Pokémon by dropping directly into the heart of the mountain, even though it had sky access via an open crater, so this would be the closest they could get from the sky. The rest of the way, they would have to go on foot.

As his sneakers hit the thin layer of frost dusting the rocky ground, Dane took a deep breath. Reaching out a hand, he helped Silver down as well before returning the fossil Pokémon to its ball.

"Need to stop into the Pokémon center?" Dane asked.

"No. How about you? How are you on ethers?"

"Topped up on PP and a few in my pack."

After spraying down with repels, they crossed the threshold into the lengthy trek to one of the deepest rooms of the mountain's innards: the Moon Stone Grotto.

It was slow going, even with the Zubats and Geodudes giving them a wide berth. Thanks to frequent breaks in the stone ceiling, there was enough natural light to navigate by, even as dusk faded and twilight took its turn. However, they also let in snow and ice that slicked the smooth cave floors and made even shallow crevices potentially deadly falls.

"Hey Dane-" Silver winced as his own voice echoed harshly off the cavern walls. Dropping his tone to a whisper, he asked, "So, does your family not have any holiday traditions or what?"

"Yes and no?" Dane chuckled quietly, being conscious of his volume. "It's a little chaotic, though; or at least unconventional. See, neither of my parents are actually from Kanto."

"Really? I never knew…"

"Yeah. You'd know it immediately if you met them, though. My dad's from Johto and dresses like he still lives there, and my mom's from Kalos. She's got a pretty heavy accent. They came here for conservation work, fell in love, and settled down. I was born in Fuschia. Er…" Dane froze in his tracks. "I mean… *Dane* was born in Fuschia. Although, I did *hatch* in Fuschia…"

Silver grabbed Dane's hand, taking him by surprise. He'd been a few steps ahead the last time he'd looked, but now he was right by his side.

"You were born in Fuschia," Silver repeated back to him, staring into Dane's eyes with a deadly serious intensity. If he hadn't known him as well as he did, it might have even been threatening.

Instead, once the shock wore off, Dane smiled back. Tears stung the corners of his eyes. "Yeah. Um, so between that and their work being kind of unpredictable, our holiday traditions mostly boil down to cooking and eating a ton of food together. We give small gifts, maybe play some board games. It's kind of a mishmash of things, but it's mostly just about spending time together."

Silver looked away.

"At least it's better than nothing."

Dane felt as though a Pin Needle had hit him straight in the heart. It was clear in Silver's tone that "nothing" was exactly what he was used to. Even without knowing exactly what Silver's home life was after his father left, Dane could tell it had been a thorn in his side to that day. He gave Silver's hand a firm squeeze.

"After we finish this survey and give Oak our report, you should come spend a week or two at our house. My parents would be thrilled to meet you."

"Would they?" Silver snapped, glowering at the cave floor.

Dane sucked in a breath. "Yeah. They would."

"...Fine." Silver's momentary anger lentified. "Only 'cause I have nothing better to do. Okay?"

Dane smiled and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Of course."

In the quiet moment that followed, a sweet, cheery chanting lilted in from further down the tunnel. At first, Dane thought it was his romantic side conjuring a backing track for the tender exchange they were sharing; until Silver turned towards the origin of the sound as well.

"Do you hear…singing?" Dane's hands reflexively flew up to cover his ears. Silver raised an eyebrow until he lowered them. "If it was Sing, I think we'd already be asleep."

"Right…" Straining his ears against the distortion of the echo, Dane tried to parse the reverberating lyrics. "It's definitely Clefairy and Clefable, but I can't make out what they're saying."

"They don't sound like they're in distress. Still, let's hurry up."

Continuing to pick their way along the same path they had traveled together numerous times before on previous surveys, the pair eventually arrived at their ultimate destination.

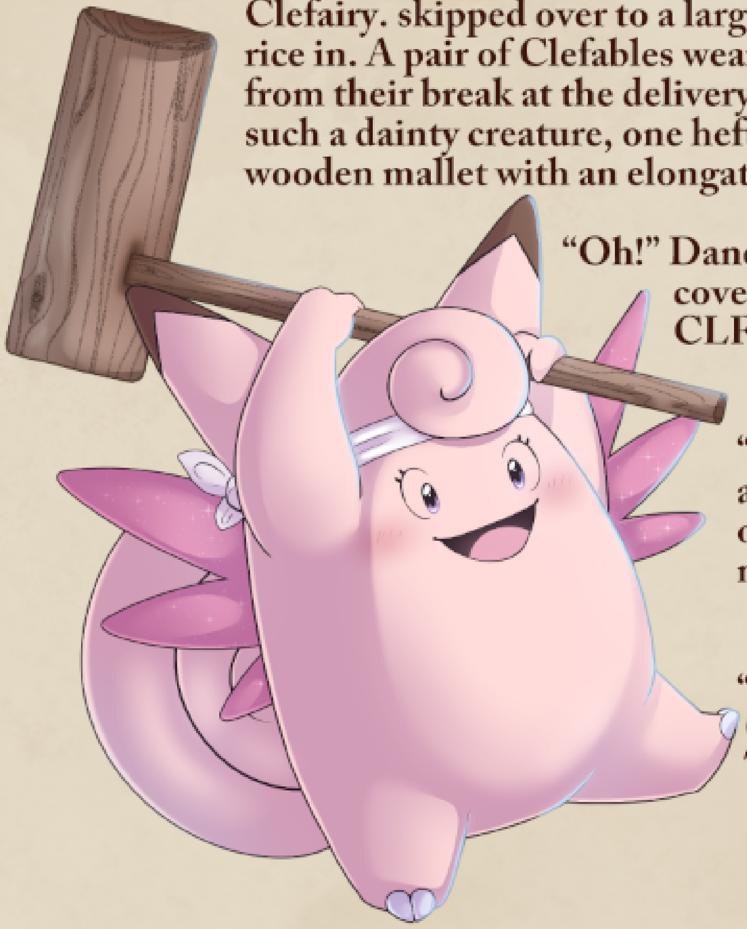
"I still can't believe the largest known in-tact meteor, made entirely of moon stone, was right here, and now it's gone forever thanks to Team Rocket," Silver grumbled.

"Shh!" As they entered the grotto, Dane released Starlight, his Clefable that he'd met as a Clefairy years ago in that very spot, from her Pokéball. The two exchanged a nod of understanding before Dane Transformed into a Clefairy himself. Starlight would act as their ambassador if need be, but going undercover was the easiest way for Dane to get up close and personal for these surveys without disturbing the natural balance.

Sticking to the cover of various rocks and boulders scattered about the perimeter, the three cautiously yet curiously approached. Peeking out, they were treated to a most fantastical sight.

The grotto was bustling with activity as though every last Clefairy and Clefable in all of Mt. Moon had gathered for the occasion. On one side of the cavern, Clefairy drew water from a natural underground spring using clay cups and bowls. They carried it over to another small group and poured it over bamboo frames filled with grains of rice that the others were washing.

Once clean, a container was collected and brought to a Clefable who was tending the fire below a seiro, already stacked high with several containers of rice being steamed. The Clefable held up a hand as a Clefairy attempted to add a container to the stack. Removing the lid from the top of the stack, the Clefable sniffed the rice and gave a sigh of deep satisfaction. Calling over a line of Clefairy who were on standby, it waited until the finished rice had been ferried off before allowing the new container to be set upon the seiro.



With thick, folded cloth protecting their tiny hands from the heat, the Clefairy. skipped over to a large stone mortar and poured the rice in. A pair of Clefables wearing white headbands perked up from their break at the delivery. With surprising strength for such a dainty creature, one hefted a massive, long-handled, wooden mallet with an elongated head to match.

“Oh!” Dane exclaimed, still sticking behind cover. “That’s CLFB0102 and CLFR0103!”

“Are you sure?” Silver pulled out a pad of paper and a pen from one of his many pockets to make a note.

“Yeah. Although, I guess CLFR0103 is CLF*B*0103 now. They grow up so fast.”

The two fairy brothers had long been a highlight of these surveys for Dane, and seeing them both fully evolved filled his heart with joy.

As ‘102 lifted the mallet high overhead, ‘103 set down a bowl of water, dipped his hands in it, and stood ready by the mortar.

“Faaa~ble!

Like a well-oiled machine, the pair instantly fell into a rhythm of pounding and folding the steamed rice - back and forth, back and forth, shouting to the beat as they worked - until it had formed one huge blob of sweet, gooey paste. Dane’s mouth watered as ‘103 gave the dough ball one final slap and left it shimmering in the moonlight.

A pair of Clefairy hurried over and scooped up the mass of ground rice paste. Scurrying off excitedly, they delivered it to a low, stone table coated in flour where others were already busily pinching bits off of a previous batch and rolling them into perfectly shaped mochi.

“Fa-a~ble~.” Starlight cupped her cheeks in her paws, a small line of drool running down from the corner of her mouth as she stared longingly at the treats.

“Same!” Dane concurred. “Plus, this might be the first time this ritual has ever been observed by humans! I wish we’d brought a camcorder.”

A few Clefairy turned their heads at the covert muttering, and Dane froze. Silver ducked behind the boulder they’d been camped out behind as the wild Pokémon skipped over happily.

“Fairy? Fairy?”

“Fable! Faaable!”

“F-Fairy! Riiii…”

After a brief round of introductions, Starlight and Dane were both taken by the hands and led over to the floured table. Even though they were outsiders, they were instantly welcomed by the other Clefairy and offered a space to work at.

Dane marveled at the mountain of finished mochi sitting at one end of the table. Not only were they the first humans to witness such festivities among Mt. Moon’s wild Pokémon, but they were being invited to *participate*. They would be able to include vital first-hand accounts of the proceedings when writing up their report. Dane couldn’t believe their luck. Professor Oak would be over the moon.

Without thinking, he turned to where Silver was still hiding, hoping to catch his eye. When he saw the other man watching from afar, however, he was suddenly struck by the guilt of contributing to Silver's loneliness. It had been necessary to leave him behind to keep up the charade, but that didn't help him ignore the echo of Silver's words in his mind.

'...better than nothing.'

"Fable! Fable?" Starlight followed his gaze when Dane failed to take the mochi lump he was being offered. A few others turned to look as well, until one finally shouted in alarm: a human had been spotted in the grotto. The other Pokémon all stopped their work to stare, and panicked murmurs broke out amongst them.

As Dane stared on helplessly, torn between his love and the research that both of them had worked so hard for, Starlight acted quickly. Skipping over to Silver, she took his hand, just as the wild Clefairy had with her and Dane, and led him out into the moonlight pouring in from the wide-open cavern ceiling for all who were gathered there to see.

Dane listened in awe as Starlight launched into a heartfelt plea for her fellow 'mon to accept the human as they had accepted her and Dane. She shared anecdotes of their travels together, carefully avoiding any reference to Dane's true nature, as proof of Silver's trustworthiness and devotion to furthering humans' understanding of Pokémon. She extolled the virtues of building connections with outside Pokémon and humans alike, calling back to the heroes who once rid the caves of the nefarious Team Rocket and their lamps. Dane's heart swelled at her impassioned defense of Silver. If only he could have understood her too.

Despite her efforts, the wild Clefairy and Clefable gathered in the grotto hesitated, glancing nervously at one another for input. Seeing their cold reception, Silver turned to leave.

"It's fine, Starlight. I don't even have a place among humans. I know I'm not welcome here." As he took a step to leave, however, CLFB0102 leapt weightlessly through the air, mallet in hand, and landed in front of him, blocking his exit. Silver eyed the ungainly tool warily. "I'm going. We don't have to make a big deal out of this."

'102 looked him up and down, studying him as carefully as they had studied the Pokémon. '103 shouted a joking yet nonetheless worrying provocation to his brother from where he squatted beside their mortar. Apparently satisfied with what he was seeing, the Clefable held the mallet out to Silver, his eyes shining with a silent, manly understanding. Silver looked at Dane for direction, exasperated. Holding back a giggle, Dane motioned with his paw for him to go ahead. Still looking confounded, Silver accepted the mallet gracefully.

Turning to his fellow 'mon, '102 proclaimed, "Aaable!" to which they all, Dane included, clapped and cheered.

As '102 shoved him along in the direction of the mortar, Silver looked back at Dane with a smile even softer and gooeyer than mochi.

Silver wiped the sweat from his brow as he stepped back from the mortar. A pair of Clefairy skipped over and scooped the freshly pounded paste up and away for forming into cakes. The Clefable brothers said something that he couldn't understand but somehow sensed was friendly ribbing. Perhaps spending so much time with Dane was rubbing off on him.

As he leaned on the mallet, waiting for the next batch of steamed rice, Silver felt a tug at his sleeve. Looking down, he saw Dane, still in Clefairy form, given away only by his signature snaggle tooth. It peeked out from the opposite side of his mouth as all the others'. In his tiny paws, he held up a milky-white mochi cake, coated in flour.

"You made this?" Silver asked, unable to fully suppress a smile.

"Riii!" Dane trilled proudly.

Taking the cake, Silver watched Dane skip back to the table before taking a shy bite. The mochi was perfectly soft, sweet, fluffy, and gooey.

And it was still warm.

"Never-Melt Heart"

Author: milky.mosaic
Spot Artist: CoolCoolSkies

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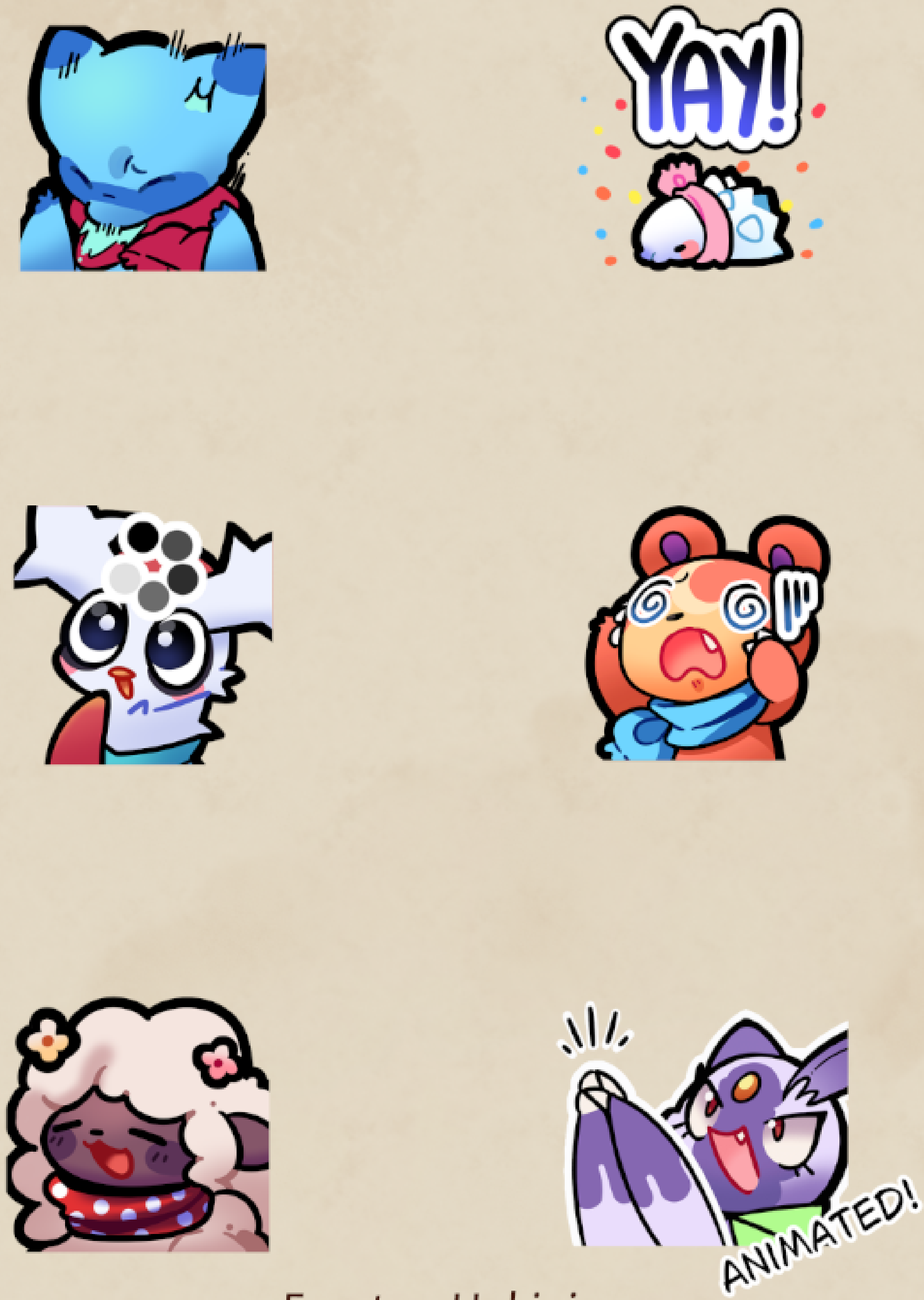
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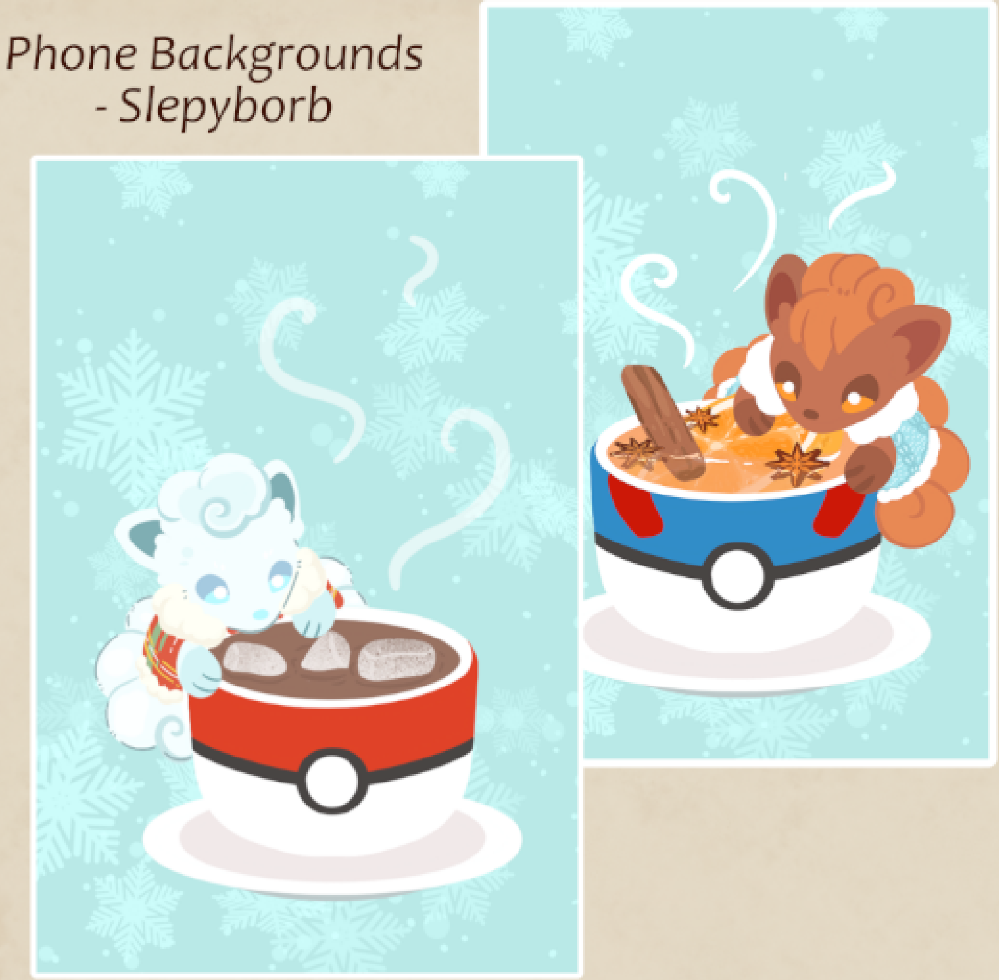

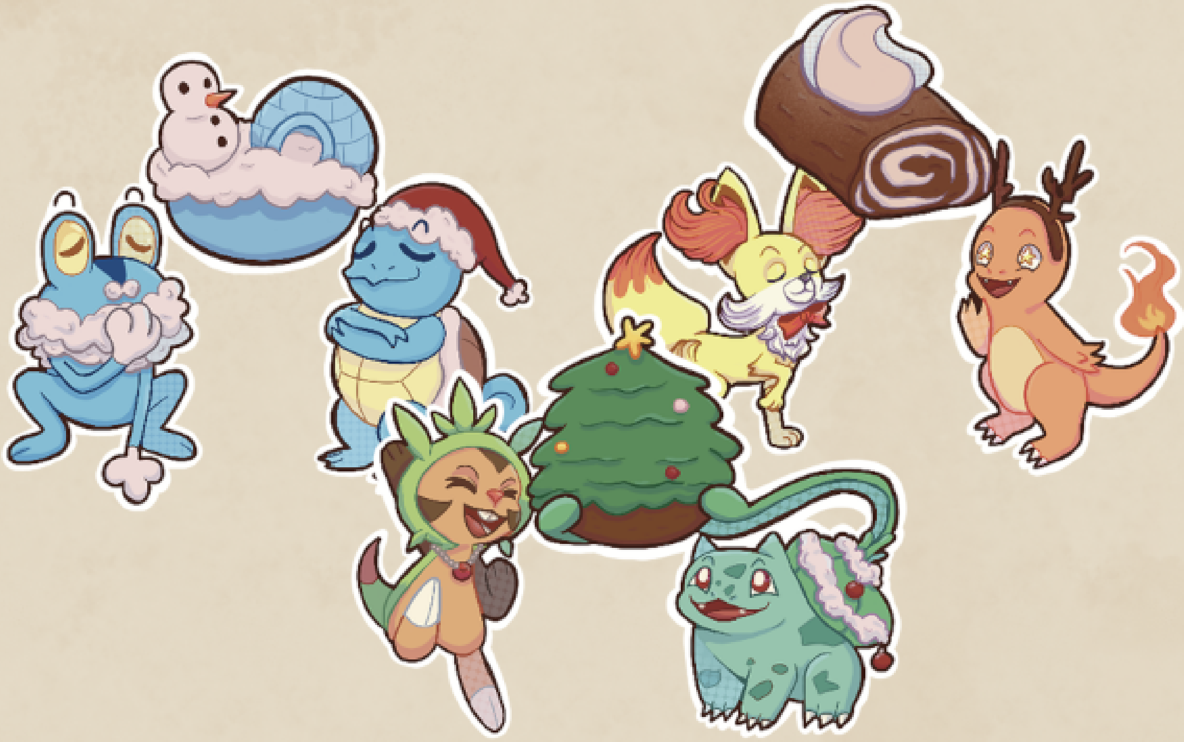

Discord Stickers- Foldable Mattress

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"This zine is my favorite to do every year, and I'm so thankful for my mod team who helps me put it together, and all the contributors who take part in it! Already planning for Vol III~"

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"My hobby of making spreadsheets is finally of use! Now to get my recipes as organized as my fics..."

RECIPE NAME:

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Social Media Mod

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the-kings-of-games.tumblr.com

"I must be silly, or I will scream. Please be nice to me because I will cry. QvQ"

RECIPE NAME:

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"Getting to work on this project for its first volume was a real treat (hehe), so as soon as I was invited to come back, I couldn't say no!

This zine has connected me with the franchise in better ways than I could've imagined, so hopefully it can bring you all some joy, since we worked really hard on it! Happy New Year! :3"

RECIPE NAME:

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COURSE TYPE:

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Recipe Mod

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"What matters the most around this time of the year is the cozy comfort that traditions bring. I believe that food is one of the strongest ways to connect with tradition and being a mod for such a passionate project has been a dream come true.

I hope 2025 brings you all comfort and joy inside and outside of the holiday season."

RECIPE NAME:

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COURSE TYPE:

Art Mod

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"I'm so glad I was able to work on such a cute and cosy project (and I got to spread more Mudkip propaganda~ >:3)! Hope you enjoy all the beautiful pieces and tasty recipes!"

RECIPE NAME:

Daddy_Jiro

COURSE TYPE:

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"Working on Winter Wonderland has been amazing! I've always wanted to work on a Pokemon project, and the fact it combines art, fic and tasty treats was a dream come true!"

Thank you for reading Winter Wonderland - Vol II

Thank you to everyone who contributed in this year's zine! Winter Wonderland is such a dear zine to me, and I love that I get to bringit back for another year. I meet so many exceptional artists and writers through hosting it, and am always amazed by what you all create! This zine wouldn't be here without you all, so thank you!

A very special thank you to my mod team as well, who help to bring this zine to life! Winter Wonderland always has a huge turnout, and I would never get it done without you very generously offering your time and energy to help out. ;u;

You guys get to be apart of my holiday joy every year, and this zine would be nothing without the love you all bring!

And to our readers and enjoyers, thank you for your support! Remember to check out the artists socials in the Contributor Index, and show them the love!

I hope you had a wonderful holiday season! Wishing you, my contributors, and my mod team all the best in our new year!

Hope to see you again in May 2025 for Vol III~

-CoolCoolSkies

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